

Three steps to advance Israeli-Arab peace

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The Israeli-Palestinian agreement of last September derived its unusual strength from its explicit and implicit commitment to mutual recognition. Within that context, the Declaration of Principles (DOP) for negotiation was constructed to give Palestinians the hope and expectation that they will have an independent state, and Israelis the assurance that they are not committing themselves to a dangerous set of arrangements.

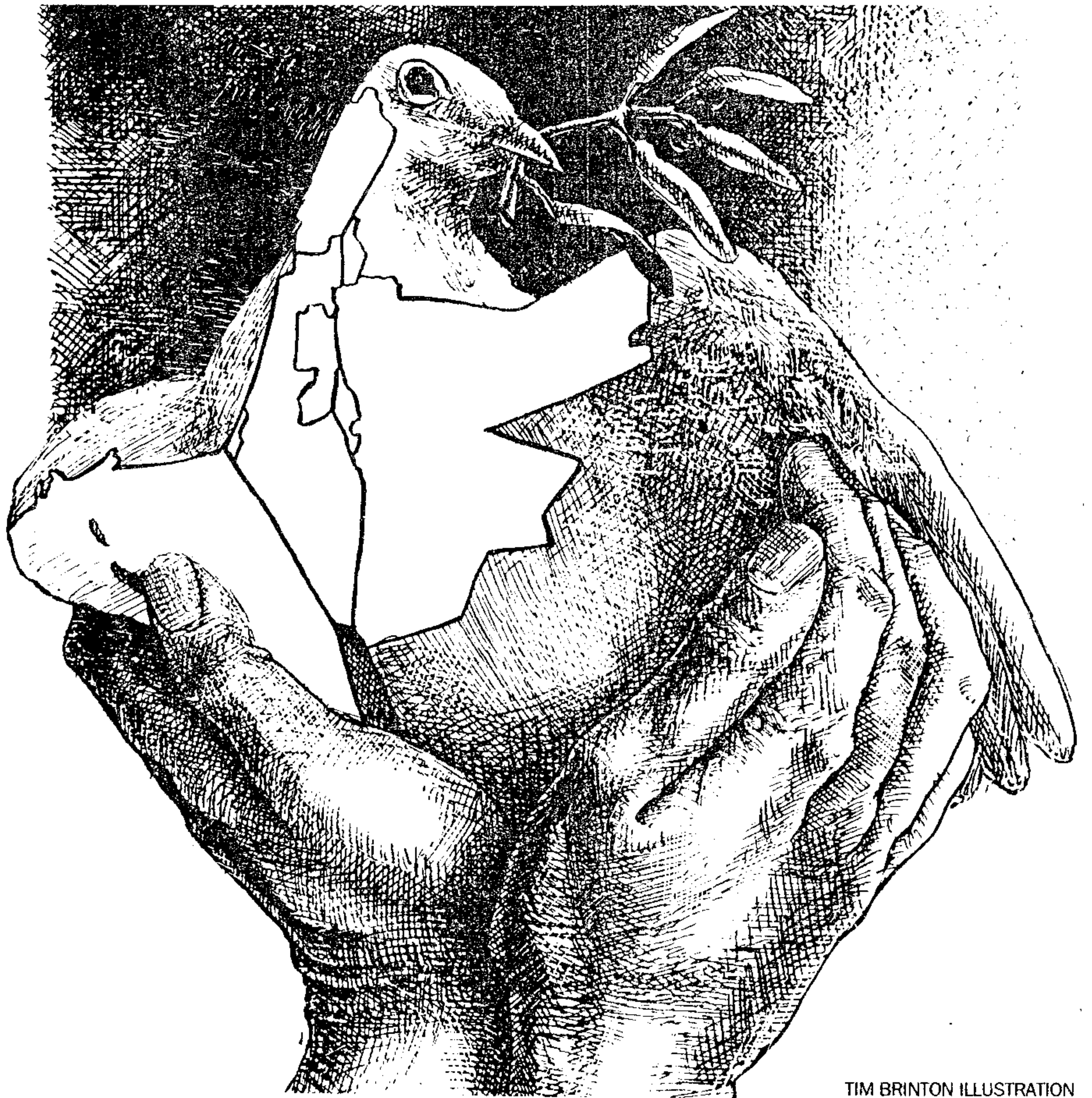
These two requirements contain some inherent contradictions, since interim arrangements must be seen by Palestinians as first steps toward the anticipated future state, and by Israelis as gradual, limited steps that leave the future open to further negotiation.

For Palestinians, the greatest obstacle in the recent peace process has been the lack of visible change in their daily existence. Not only have the anticipated economic benefits failed to materialize so far, but the population is still under occupation, feels controlled by Israeli soldiers and threatened by Israeli settlers, and perceives continuity in Israeli policies and practices, including settlement activities.

These realities have contributed to acts of violence, internal strife, and disillusionment with the peace process among Palestinians, which in turn have helped erode Israelis' belief that the process can lead to peaceful coexistence.

Palestinians' sense of vulnerability and despair has been greatly magnified by the Hebron massacre. There is a widespread sentiment that the peace process has not only failed to create positive change but has made the situation worse. Popular disenchantment with the leadership and the negotiations, along with acts of counterviolence in response to the massacre, can destroy the political atmosphere on which further movement toward peace depends. An essential requirement for regaining the lost momentum of the peace process is to introduce changes that will restore the Palestinians' trust in their leadership, belief in the sincerity of their Israeli negotiating partner, and hope for an outcome that satisfies their fundamental needs.

Significant changes are necessary. My focus is on Israeli settlements and Palestinian security, which the Hebron massacre has brought into salience. Meaningful changes require strict adherence to the principles of equality and reciprocity that are at the heart of the commitment to mu-



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tual recognition. Three steps embodying these principles are crucial.

First, the Israeli government must enforce a halt to all settlement activities, including expansion of existing settlements in the occupied territories, and building on the outskirts of Jerusalem and the Arab sectors of the city. The Palestinians' agreement to postpone negotiations over settlements and Jerusalem, as stipulated in the DOP, implies a reciprocal Israeli agreement to maintain the status quo in advance of negotiations. Unless settlement activities are frozen, there will be nothing left of Jerusalem and an ever smaller portion of the West Bank over which to negotiate. A decision to halt all settlement activities would immediately improve the Palestinians' situation and restore their belief in the value of the negotiations.

Second, the rules governing possession and use of arms by the civilian population in the territories must be applied equally to Israeli settlers and Palestinian residents. It is untenable to allow one group to carry weapons while disarming the other. An evenhanded policy is particularly imperative in the wake of the Hebron massacre, which has shown that weapons intended for defense can easily be used for at-

tack. Settlements that cannot be adequately protected under this policy, such as the provocative enclaves inside Hebron, should be evacuated, as several members of the Israeli Cabinet already propose.

Third, as long as Israel maintains control of the territories, it must assure equal protection to all residents. If the army cannot protect Palestinian residents, alternative mechanisms must be introduced, such as a temporary international or foreign presence, as proposed in the DOP.

Steps along these lines conform with the DOP and reflect the spirit of reciprocity and equality underlying the Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Such steps may improve the situation on the ground and restore people's hope so the peace process could be resumed without requiring renegotiation of the DOP. Reopening the DOP would undermine Israelis' confidence in their Palestinian negotiating partner and would delay – and possibly jeopardize – the promising movement toward peace begun last September.

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