
Guest Commentary

The Geneva Accords: Two States or None

by Paul Usiskin

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It's hard for a peace activist not to draw hope from the Geneva Accords. Predicated on two states for two peoples, Geneva offers a real map to reach that goal. As a television producer, I had an unique basis from which to closely observe two secret tranches of the Geneva negotiations—at Woking, near Windsor, in February 2003; and in Jordan, at the Dead Sea, in October 2003.

The three days at Woking ended with impasses over the release of prisoners and the formula for right of return of refugees. Ex-Chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin Shahak and Minister Hisham Abdel Razek debated the prisoners' issue, exchanging many bitten-off words. For Razek, a Gazan jailed for over 20 years for an attempted bombing, all the prisoners should be released on the signing of the final status deal Geneva was designed to achieve. They were prisoners of war, in Palestinian eyes. To Lipkin Shahak, over 1,000 of them were criminals with Jewish blood on their hands, whom only God could release.

Other issues, the Old City of Jerusalem especially, found quicker resolution. Earlier frequent contacts, often in secret, sometimes risky, laid the ground work for imaginative proposals. Professor Menachem Klein of Bar Ilan University, a modern orthodox Jew intent on a negotiated peace deal, and Dr Nazmi Al-Joubeh of the PLO's negotiation support unit had suggested, *inter alia*, almost invisible crossing-points between Palestinian and Israeli neighborhoods, using swipe cards.

Real Painful Concessions

The Jordan Talks were very different. The atmosphere was intense and this highlighted the different approaches by the two delegations. The Israelis met frequently to co-ordinate their stances and the debates were often anguished. Yossi Beilin listened carefully. The Palestinians' consultation style was top down, a kind of *droit de seigneur* in which Yasser Abed Rabbo would often come to delegation meetings, speak, be listened to respectfully, and then leave.

The plethora of ex-military Israelis—including Amram Mitzna, former Labor Party leader, former GOC Central Command; together with former deputy heads of the air force, the National Security Council, etc—created a strong sense that concessions were being made. These were the painful concessions that Ariel Sharon would never make. Ariel, the settlement town of 25,000 settlers, a Tel Aviv suburb in the northern West Bank, would be sacrificed for Palestinian territorial contiguity. Palestinian sovereignty would be granted over the Temple Mount. But there was deep uncertainty over how this would play on the Israeli street.

The same was true for the Right of Return of Refugees formula—acknowledging the Right, but through Camp David/President Clinton land-swap arrangements and a declaration that Return means to the new Palestinian homeland. Subsequently, Palestinian public opinion was not satisfied.



The Geneva Accord's chief negotiators, Yossi Beilin of Israel and Yasser Abd Rabbo of Palestine: Their delegations were very different in their approach to the negotiations, but found a common principle.



Israeli negotiator Nehama Ronen from the Likud party saw the talks “as a chance to ensure that her sons wouldn’t have to serve as occupiers.”

In the end, the Geneva Accords were agreed after firm Swiss inter-delegation shuttle diplomacy. At the closing plenary, Nehama Ronen, a Likud Party Central Committee member, who later admitted she’d almost walked out of the talks, said she then saw them as a chance to ensure her sons wouldn’t have to serve as occupiers. Nabil Kassis, one of the most uncompromising of the Palestinian negotiators at Woking, said the Geneva Accords offered hope. Amos Oz, the novelist, insisted that as long as the Palestinian tragedy continued, Israel would have no security. It was, and is hard to reject these sentiments, resulting from momentary glimpses of the humanity in the other.

Three months after the commitment ceremony in Geneva, Ariel Sharon’s announcement of plans for a possible unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, takes more than a side-swipe at the Geneva Accords. It is a blow for a negotiated settlement, and as clear a statement of his opposition to creating a Palestinian state. That this was revealed on Feb. 2 when the Geneva Accords people met with the President of the European Union in Brussels and then with Prime Minister Blair and Foreign Secretary Straw in London, was not coincidental. The headlines were all Sharon’s the next day. And the day after, there were more questions about the fraud charges he is facing. If he is charged with crimes of moral turpitude, he’d have to resign to defend himself.

Shaky though Sharon’s future may be, Dr. Emanuele Ottolenghi, a Mid-East lecturer and analyst at St Antony’s College, Oxford, echoes the Sharon administration’s mantra for dealing with the Intifada, of “Hit them and hit them and hit them again.” Each time there’s a suicide bomb, Ottolenghi asserts, the separation Wall/Fence should encompass more Palestinian territory until the Palestinians learn the lesson and curb the terrorists. He believes unilateral withdrawal serves Israel’s national interests, and that we are entering a period of conflict management which will be the status quo for at

least one generation. Of Hamas filling the vacuum in Gaza, Ottolenghi says that’s the Palestinians’ business, not Israel’s. Ultimately, he thinks that whilst both peoples notionally support a two-state solution, there is now no real way to achieve it.

Gilad Sher, formerly Ehud Barak’s chef de bureau, urges a similar withdrawal scenario, modified slightly by a phased process involving both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, part of a process leading to an end of conflict.

Last Chance for Two-State Solution

Two states for two people is an official Palestinian mantra. And yet they don’t believe that the conflict can be managed in a vacuum. They fear it will last several generations, in which an incremental interim solution with elements of a Palestinian state, and of autonomy, will emerge until a distant generation on both sides reaches an uncharted point of wisdom, at which the conflict is declared over.

Palestinian sources suggest that the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza will take place over a period of years, and that it won’t begin until Gaza settlers have alternatives—i.e., new homes, probably in the West Bank, approved and funded by the United States. They do not expect any consultations with Prime Minister Qureia on withdrawal, because that would mean Sharon expending some political capital—some form of *quid pro quo*—for which he is simply not prepared.

One Gazan source predicts that by year’s end, Palestinian society, which has shown itself to be extraordinarily resilient, will re-engage across the board in another phase of Intifada similar to the first. This time, it is believed the Palestinians will not be throwing stones.

If you want a two-state solution in the framework of a negotiated settlement, Yasser Arafat is your last chance for delivering it. And it is the Geneva Accords that can provide that framework.

Putting it crudely, it isn’t that the national interests of both sides are not served by a two-state solution, so much as the unwillingness of what passes for the leaderships of both peoples to actually face each other and talk it through.

Be that as it may, the next ambitious step for the Geneva Accords proponents is to gain endorsement from the Arab League. That is not quite as tall an order as it sounds. The Arab League’s Summit in Beirut two years ago proposed a negotiated deal with Israel, something that Sharon rejected outright, and is forgotten by those who insist that the Arab world still wants to destroy Israel. For Arab leaders, the truth of Israel’s existence is undeniable. Geneva, to them, provides a rational step forward in that recognition process, offering, as it does, a detailed solution to a tiresome century-old conflict.

Those who insist on unilateralism and conflict management ignore the cost in lives, and the inherent desire of both peoples to find a means of peaceful co-existence. The stark choice is to pursue what Geneva suggests, or to enter a period of endless struggle which both sides know that neither can win.