

## Israelis and Palestinians Attempt to Jumpstart the Peace Process

By Stephen Zunes | December 3, 2003

The peace plan signed in Geneva December 1 by leading Israeli and Palestinian political figures represents an important step forward. Former president Jimmy Carter—who was present at the ceremony—may be correct in noting that “It’s unlikely we shall ever see a more promising foundation for peace.”

Contrary to initial reports at the time and Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat’s inept diplomacy notwithstanding, then-Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak’s peace proposal at Camp David in July 2000 did not actually provide the Palestinians with a viable independent state. President Bill Clinton’s amended proposal that December was more reasonable, but still fell short of what even moderate Palestinians could accept.

However, additional Israeli-Palestinian talks in Taba, Egypt in January 2001—which took place without direct U.S. involvement—came tantalizingly close to reaching a final peace agreement before they were suspended on the eve of the election of right-wing leader Ariel Sharon as Israeli prime minister. Efforts by the Palestinians to resume negotiations where they left off have been rebuffed both by Sharon and by the Bush administration, who have insisted that the Palestinian Authority must first stop terrorist attacks by extremist groups against Israeli civilians as well as armed resistance to Israeli forces in the occupied territories.

The Geneva Initiative, painstakingly negotiated for more than two years—despite ongoing violence by both sides—is based on the point the Taba talks left off. In contrast to Washington’s insistence on focusing upon the thus far unsuccessful confidence-building measures described in the Roadmap, the architects of the Geneva Initiative went directly to the issues at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and developed a detailed outline for a permanent-status agreement.

Actively promoted by the Swiss government and with the support of other Europeans, the 50-page document addresses the rights and security concerns of both peoples. It has been endorsed by such prominent international figures as British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, former Polish president Lech Walesca, Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov, former Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo, longtime German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and former South African president F.W. DeKlerk, as well as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and his predecessor Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

### The Agreement

According to the agreement, Israel would withdraw from virtually all of the Gaza Strip and West Bank, which were seized by Israeli forces in the 1967 War, as well as from most of its settlements in these occupied territories. Jerusalem would be the co-capital of both Israel and Palestine, with Israel controlling the important Jewish holy sites (as well as the Jewish quarter of the Old City) and Palestine controlling the major Muslim and Christian holy sites as well as Arab neighborhoods in the formerly Jordanian-controlled eastern part of the city.

The new Palestinian state would be demilitarized with strict international guarantees for Israeli security, including the disarming and disbanding of private militias and terrorist groups. There would be full diplomatic relations between the two countries, with the Palestinians recognizing Israel as the homeland for the Jewish people.

The exception to a full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories would be the Latrun area in the West Bank and a swath of land around East Jerusalem where a large number of Jewish-only settlements have been built over the past three decades. This constitutes a major concession on the part of the Palestinians, since these settlements are a direct violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention—which forbids a government from moving its civilian population onto territories seized by military force—as well as UN Security Council resolutions 446, 452, 465, and 471, which call on Israel to withdraw from such settlements.

In return, the Israelis will cede an equivalent amount of uninhabited land to the new state of Palestine.

In perhaps the most significant concession from the Palestinian side, their negotiators have waived the right of return of Palestinian refugees and their descendants into what is now Israel, despite such guarantees under a series of United Nations resolutions as well as the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and other international treaties.

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## Support for the Agreement

It appears that even with such major concessions, the agreement has the support of most Palestinian leaders. The head of the Palestinian negotiators was Yasser Abed Rabbo, a close associate of Arafat and a former minister in the Palestinian Authority. He was joined not only by former ministers Hisham Abdel Razeq and Nabil Kassis, but also young Fatah militants like Qadoura Fares and Mohammed Khourani as well as top security officials from the Palestinian establishment.

The Israeli negotiators were led by Yossi Beilin, a former Israeli justice minister who—as deputy foreign minister ten years ago—played an instrumental role in drafting the Oslo Accords. Other top Israeli officials in the negotiations included such prominent Knesset members as former Labor Party Leader Avram Mitzna and former Knesset speaker Avraham Burg.

A scientific public opinion poll sponsored by the James Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice University late last month revealed that a majority of both Israelis and Palestinians support the outline of the agreement. A differently worded survey by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* showed somewhat less support on the Israeli side, but still indicated a significant minority in support of the Geneva Initiative.

While the Palestine Authority has thus far failed to explicitly endorse the agreement, Arafat wrote a letter that was read at the signing ceremony in which the Palestinian leader called it “a brave and courageous initiative” which “opens the door to peace.” *Haaretz* reported that Arafat, former Palestinian Prime minister Mahmoud Abbas, and current Prime minister Ahmed Qureia approved the details of the agreement.

By contrast, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon has denounced the initiative, with his Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert referring to it as “shameful,” “pathetic,” and “very grave.”

Given that Arafat has taken a far more moderate position than Sharon, it is ironic that the Bush administration still insists that Sharon is “a man of peace” and that Arafat is the chief obstacle to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The

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## Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

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United States has provided large-scale military, economic, and diplomatic support for Sharon’s occupation policies while demanding that Arafat be marginalized or deposed.

Similarly, the entire Democratic Party leadership in Congress signed a public letter this September declaring that “Time and time again, the Israeli people have shown their willingness to take risks for peace” but that “The Palestinians have at best been ambivalent about their willingness to accept Israel’s existence.”

Not surprisingly, Washington has not been terribly supportive of the Geneva Initiative, since it is only through such distortions that the United States can justify its support for Sharon’s rightist government, its occupation forces, and its colonization drive in the West Bank.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher, who has dismissed this breakthrough as “a private effort,” put forward the administration’s position that it was premature to talk about the substantive issues since they should be reserved for the latter stages of the U.S.-led peace process, which could not even begin until there was a cessation of Palestinian violence.

Principal Israeli negotiator Beilin has stated that he is resigned to the fact that “The Geneva Initiative will not be accepted by Washington.” Despite this, however, he and his Palestinian counterpart were able to arrange a meeting with Secretary of State Colin Powell over Sharon’s strident objections. Meanwhile, on Capitol Hill, Senator Diane Feinstein and Representatives Lois Capps and Amos Houghton have introduced a resolution broadly supportive of such peace efforts.

The Geneva Initiative shows that a comprehensive, negotiated peace between Israelis and Palestinians is possible. The question is whether the United States will allow it to happen.

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