

Geneva Accord—Beacon Amid Mideast Troubles

by William Jones

In a Washington forum organized by the Swiss Foundation for World Affairs on Feb. 10 on the Geneva Initiative for Middle East peace, speakers from both the Israeli and Palestinian delegations to the Geneva negotiations met to present their outlook for peace, and the purposes of their initiative.

At a time when the violence in the Middle East seems to reach ever greater heights, a group of Israelis and Palestinians have put forward a proposal which they feel would provide the impetus for a final status agreement to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (see interviews which follow). The agreement which was formally signed at a meeting in Geneva on Dec. 1, 2003 represented something of an anomaly in a situation where even the truncated “Road Map” touted by the Bush Administration was pretty much in shreds, or as one of the speakers put it, “clinically dead, but not yet certified.”

Comprehensive Solution with International Backing

The Geneva Initiative has received a broad spectrum of political support from the international community. “We are using every meeting to push the initiative at every level,” said Urs Ziswiler, Senior Diplomatic Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, which has given strong support to the initiative. Already support has been received from Canada, Norway, Sweden, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, Ziswiler said. In the Arab world, the Initiative has garnered support from Morocco and Qatar, and meetings will be held with Saudi Arabia regarding the proposal.

The Geneva Initiative is the more remarkable in that it encompasses, in its form of a draft permanent status agreement, an agreed resolution to all the major areas of contention. This, according to the initiators, was absolutely essential for the success of the negotiations on the measure. “The Road Map is seriously deficient,” said Gaith Al-Omari, a member of the Palestinian delegation. “The concept of a Palestinian state is not enough. You must have the end-game clarified.” In addition, as several speakers underlined, the notion of a “sequenced” end of the Middle East conflict would only leave the door open for some disgruntled activist or group to launch

an atrocity, which would push the “sequencing” one or more steps backward.

The Geneva Accord, as it is called, does clarify the end-game. The Accord calls for: 1) Two states, one Jewish and one Palestinian; 2) Withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967, with border adjustments and territorial swaps; 3) Sharing sovereignty in Jerusalem, following the formula, “What is Jewish will be Israeli, what is Arab will be Palestinian”; 4) A solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees that is based on compensation, rehabilitation, and resettlement; 5) Special arrangements to ensure Israeli security; and 6) An announced and enforced end to the conflict, including all forms of terrorism and violence.

The agreement excludes the right of return of Palestinians to homes they may have formerly inhabited within the territory of Israel, perhaps the most difficult concession for the Palestinians to accept, but without which an agreement might be well-nigh impossible. “Indeed, it is a grave injustice not to let Palestinians live in parts of Palestine,” said Gadi Baltansky, former press spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and a member of the Israeli delegation to Geneva. “But it is also incorrect not to allow Jews to have their state. A compromise must be found.”

Needed: Region’s Populations’ Support

According to recent polls of Israeli citizens, said Daniel Levy, one of the architects of the Geneva Accord, there is presently about 40% support for the agreement among the population, although this is by no means matched in the percentage of support in the present Knesset. Support for individual parts of the agreement is much higher, however.

Probably something of the same percentages prevail on the Palestinian side, added Gaith Al-Omari.

Their real task ahead is to increase that support by building confidence in the Geneva Accord in Israel and in the Palestinian areas. The international support, in particular that from the United States, is important in building that confidence.

“We now have a detailed and fair paper to use,” Lipkin-Shahak said. “We now have to pave the road to get there. The Accords must be inserted in the conversation every time that Israelis speak with Palestinians and that Palestinians speak with Israelis.”

While Secretary of State Colin Powell did express his appreciation for the Geneva Initiative in a meeting with two of its initiators, Yossi Beilin and Yasser Abed Rabbo, on Dec. 5, the Administration’s verbal insistence on the virtually moribund “Road Map” has effectively opened the way for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to begin implementing his own “unilateral” solutions in the region. These are moves which, given Sharon’s profile, may unleash unforeseen—and devastating—consequences. The Administration’s continually harping on its step-by-step Road Map, is rapidly becoming a genuine “road-block” to a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.