

With Road Map Stalled, Geneva ME Pact Gains

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Peace *can* be made in the Middle East. This is the message of the Geneva Initiative launched by Israeli Yossi Beilin and Palestinian Yasser Abed Rabbo, both former peace negotiators. The draft accord for comprehensive peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, although not a government initiative on either side, has been endorsed by significant forces inside Israel and Palestine, and is gaining international recognition. On Nov. 20, a symbolic peace treaty signing ceremony is scheduled in Geneva, under the sponsorship of the Swiss Foreign Ministry. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter has announced his intention to attend, and Bill Clinton may follow suit. Presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche declared his support for the initiative during an international webcast on Oct. 22 in Washington, D.C.

‘We Took Peace Into Our Hands’

Yossi Beilin, the chief Israeli negotiator for the Oslo Accords, published in the Oct. 31 issue of the American Jewish weekly *Forward*, a detailed account of his and Abed Rabbo’s efforts to revive the peace quest.

Noting that people had asked how he dared launch a peace initiative opposed by his own government, Beilin wrote, “Given the current state of affairs in my country and my region, how could I not?” No one, he said, expects President Bush to do anything about the peace effort until after the November 2004 elections in the United States—leaving the region “stuck in this horrific mud of ours.” “If we, the Israelis and the Palestinians, do not try—ourselves—then no one else is going to do it for us.” He recounted that he and Abed Rabbo believed that, with a few more weeks of effort in January 2001, the Taba Accords would have been completed and a comprehensive settlement worked out. However, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon came to power at that time, and the region plunged into a new period of violence and intransigence.

Beilin and Abed Rabbo decided that they would revive the Taba talks, as private citizens, to demonstrate that people of good will on both sides could reach a viable peace. The two men began meeting, as opportunities arose. Beilin described: “Sometimes we would meet at checkpoints, where we sat in a car, in order to go over texts. Other times we would meet abroad. Some of the talks were held by video conference.” After two and a half years, the men produced a 50-page document, with many maps.

Beilin described the agreement as centered on “the ex-

change of two virtual rights”—Israeli control over Jerusalem’s Temple Mount, and the Palestinian right of return. No Muslim would accept Israeli control over the Temple Mount, just as no Israeli would accept the unlimited right of Palestinians to return, which would end the Jewish character of the state of Israel. The Geneva Initiative proposes to give the Palestinians sovereignty over the Temple Mount, with an international administrative and dispute-resolution body; and to give Israel sovereign control over its immigration policy, setting limits on the number of Palestinians who could move to Israel per year. “We have done the maximum that citizens can do when they believe that the solution is just around the next corner,” Beilin said, “and that the current situation is totally unbearable. Now it’s up to our leaders.”

International Diplomacy

Among world governments, Switzerland is most actively promoting the initiative. Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Ray took the plan to various capitals, including London—where she informed British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw—and Washington. She presented the plan to Jewish organizations in New York, as well as to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who welcomed it. She was reportedly told in Washington that the United States “cannot and does not want to take a position on it.”

British Prime Minister Tony Blair welcomed the initiative, as did French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin. De Villepin, after meeting with Beilin and Abed Rabbo, explained that the plan complements rather than contradicts the Road Map, backed by America, the European Union, Russia, and the UN. De Villepin and Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel have decided to push the initiative inside the EU, and to give financial support to make it possible for every household in Israel and the Palestinian territories, to have a copy.

Predictably, the initiative has wrought panic in the Sharon government. Foreign Ministry Director-General Yoav Biran summoned a Swiss Embassy official in Israel, to say that “the government of Israel did not authorize anyone to deal with this issue, and the Geneva Understandings [sic] have no legal validity. Israel supports the Road Map and President Bush’s vision. That is the only plan that has gained international legitimacy and that is acceptable to the parties. There is no place for alternative initiatives, and international effort invested in promoting the Geneva Understandings, such as the current Swiss activity, is liable to come at the expense of the Road Map and cause it to fail.”

The daily *Ha’aretz* reported: “The Foreign Ministry has instructed all its representatives overseas to combat any move by foreign governments or international organizations to either formally adopt the understandings or to finance efforts to sell them to the Israeli public, on the grounds that this constitutes unacceptable interference in Israel’s domestic affairs.” It will stop short of formal protests, in order not to exaggerate the importance of the initiative, *Ha’aretz* said.