

Steven David Masters

Eyewitness At Geneva

Geneva has provided a rare dosage of hope for a future of peace and security.

As a lifelong Zionist, I went to Geneva to see whether it was true that Israelis and Palestinians had actually come together to embrace reconciliation and forgiveness. What I saw exceeded my expectations. When I came home, however, I was saddened to see critical headlines and articles in the Jewish press and the low profile given the ceremony in the US mass media.

In Geneva I met Israeli and Palestinian political, military and security leaders who had struggled through their frustration and anger to complete a comprehensive peace agreement that resolves the outstanding claims between the two peoples, including solutions to issues such as the fate of Palestinian refugees and the sacred places in the Old City of Jerusalem. Most had never before been involved in their respective peace camps or in dialogue projects. Some on the Palestinian side hold key leadership positions in the Tanzim, the armed wing of Yasir Arafat's Fatah movement, while others are leaders in various refugee camps.

From the moment I entered the Great Hall where the public commitment ceremony for the Geneva Accord would take place, I felt like I was attending a wedding. The Great Hall had two large columns of chairs, with one aisle down the middle. Instead of a *huppah* there was a rather large olive tree branch. Over a thousand guests representing the two "families" sat intermixed on both sides of the aisle. As they filled the hall with the low hush of conversation, the sound system played the sounds of soaring violins. On each side of the olive branch, two large signs proclaimed: "There is a partner" and "There is a plan."



On two giant screens, a slide show began with the simple flashing of these words: "Implementation of UN resolutions," "historic reconciliation," "comprehensive regional peace," "end confrontation and conflict," "transition to logic of peace," "peace requires compromise," "secure existence," "live side by side," "conformity with international law," "realization of the permanent status," "right to statehood."

Richard Dreyfuss brought dignity and strength to the proceedings as the master of ceremonies. A longtime supporter of Americans for Peace Now, Dreyfuss com-

bined his passion for Israel with the skillful delivery of an actor to weave stories and anecdotes throughout the proceedings.

Early on, Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey stated three truths which distill the essence of the Geneva Accord: 1) There exists an alternative to violent confrontation; 2) There are partners on both sides; and 3) The outline of the details of a peaceful resolution are known.

Former President Jimmy Carter then took his place on stage to a standing ovation. He told us that "finding peace for Israelis and justice for Palestinians has been a passion for me for the last 25 years." With this one sentence, Carter deftly combined the yearnings for peace of Israelis with the struggle of Palestinians for justice.

Like the other speakers during the two and a half hour ceremony, Carter's support for the Geneva Accord was unambiguous. He stated that the only alternative to the Geneva Initiative is sustained and permanent violence and added that "it is unlikely we will see a more promising vision for peace." Finally, as the architect of the Camp David agreement between Israel and Egypt, Carter reported that no single word of that Camp David agreement has ever been violated, making the point that both Israel and its sworn enemies can indeed uphold their sides of a peace agreement.

This message of great hope was repeated by the other Nobel laureates who spoke: Lech Walesa, David Hume, Nelson Mandela, all of whom spoke of the successful transition to peace in regions racked with intractable and violent conflicts. Hume, the architect of the

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Good Friday accords in Northern Ireland, made the most lasting impression on me. He provided us with three principles which formed the basis for the success of the peace process in Northern Ireland and in bringing about the formation of the European Union:

Principle #1: Respect for difference — difference is the essence of humanity;

Principle #2: Create institutions that respect differences; and

Principle #3: Work together in common interest. Hume reminded us that this is not a uniquely European concept, citing the American motto that appears on our currency: *E Pluribus Unum* — from many, one.

For me the highlight of the ceremony was the emotional high shared by the Israeli and Palestinian delegations as they stood together and received a standing ovation from the crowd. As Yossi Beilin and Yasir Abed Rabbo beamed, it felt as if the whole room joined in embracing these courageous peacemakers.

I knew that the negotiations had been contentious because we saw video clips of difficult sessions where negotiators were unmistakably tense and frustrated. Now all of that was behind them. This was especially poignant when Lt. Gen. Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Brig. Gen. Zuheir Manasra stood together on the stage: during the first intifada, Shahak had signed the order placing Manasra in administrative detention.

As a witness I want to report the following. My ears are sensitive to anti-Israel rhetoric and I did not hear any from the speakers in Geneva. Israelis, world leaders and Palestinians called for an end to Palestinian terrorism. It was gratifying to hear Abed Rabbo direct his remarks to the global Jewish community and explicitly condemn terrorism in his colorful summation of the essence of the Geneva Accord:

“Hope against Despair,” “Peace against Violence,” “Equality against Apartheid,”



The author (left) with Amram Mitzna, M.K.

and “Coexistence and Dialogue against Terrorism.” He finished his remarks with the observation that “We have proved our dreams do not need to be the others’ nightmares ... we have imagined peace in detail.”

The details of the Geneva Accord (excerpted from *Hope Renewed: The Spirit of the Geneva Accord*, Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace, 2004; http://www.btvshalom.org/geneva/executive_summary.doc) are quite pleasing to the eyes of Israel's supporters:

- An end-of-conflict agreement that replaces all previous agreements and UN resolutions.

- Israel is recognized as the homeland of the Jewish people with its capital in a Jerusalem with the largest boundaries at any time in Jewish history.

- A sovereign and demilitarized Palestinian state is established alongside Israel with specific and quite intricate security guarantees for Israel, including a US military presence inside Palestine and along its borders and numerous bilateral and multilateral monitoring bodies which all include the State of Israel.

- Israel will annex approximately 2.5 percent of the West Bank, enabling 75 percent of settlers to be incorporated into the borders of the State of Israel.

- An equal amount of Israeli land will be annexed to the new State of Palestine, most coming from the fields of Kibbutz Artzi

kibbutzim.

- Settlements situated inside the State of Palestine are to be evacuated with their infrastructure left intact for Palestinian use, and those Israeli settlers will be compensated for their lost property.

- Jerusalem will be divided according to its already separated neighborhoods, and each state will exercise sovereignty over its holiest site. In the Old City, in which no borders will be erected, the Jewish Quarter will be under Israeli control and the Muslim, Christian, and Armenian Quarters will be under Palestinian control. Each state will control the gates to their respective quarters in the Old City, while the Jaffa Gate will be under international supervision.

- Both states will join together to end all incitement to hatred and violence in the mass media and official educational curricula.

- Palestinian refugees will have the unlimited right to move to the new Palestinian state, and will have no right to demand to return to Israel. They may request to remain in countries in which they currently reside, move to a third country, or move to Israel. Israel, like every other country that agrees to accept Palestinian refugees, will have the sole right to determine how many refugees it admits. In accordance with UN Resolutions 242 and 194, Palestinian refugees are entitled to rehabilitation assistance, compensation for property lost, and for harm incurred due to their refugee status.

Another claim is that the Initiative undermines Israeli democracy. What I saw in Geneva was democracy in action. In the face of over three years of relentless violence and without any success at sustaining meaningful negotiations, the architects of the Accord demonstrated their patriotism by reaching across the divide and exploding the myths that have kept peace negotiations moribund since the collapse of the talks facilitated by President Clinton.

Some have challenged the Geneva Accord by arguing that its very existence

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undermines the elected government of Israel since it was negotiated by political figures who were voted out of power and lacked any electoral mandate to engage in such a detailed course of negotiations. This critique is seriously flawed because it fails to grapple with the utter failure of the Sharon government's attempts to improve Israeli security through a policy of massive military incursions, closures, checkpoints and sieges, now conceded by leading figures in the Sharon cabinet and the IDF. In the face of this catastrophic failure to achieve peace and security, the architects of the Geneva Accord felt compelled to act. As Yasir Abed Rabbo explained in his speech at the ceremony, they asked themselves, "What are we to do when our governments do not meet their obligation to show what negotiations can yield?" The negotiation of the Geneva Accord was not to attempt to derail an elected government, but rather to demonstrate a way out of the cycle of violence, terror, hopelessness and despair.

The Geneva Accord has brought an end to the accepted wisdom in Israel that "there is no one to talk to and nothing to talk about" by demonstrating that there is indeed someone to talk to and something to talk about. While the Palestinian negotiators do not officially represent the Palestinian Authority, there are several indications that the Palestinians involved in the Accord enjoy official backing from the PA and Yasir Arafat. After many leading Fatah members balked at attending the ceremony without an official seal of approval from Arafat, Arafat authored a message of support that was read out loud at the ceremony and also directed



Yasir Abed Rabbo

that his chief of security, Jibril Rajoub, join the Palestinian delegation to Geneva despite the fact that Rajoub had played no role in negotiating the Accord.

After a copy of the Accord was mailed to every home in Israel and it was widely publicized in Palestine, Israelis and Palestinians have been consumed with debating and discussing the document. A recent poll from the Baker Institute for Public Policy found that 53 percent of Israelis and almost 56 percent of the Palestinians support the spirit of Geneva. A similar peace initiative called the People's Voice — launched by former Mossad director Ami Ayalon and the former PA representative in Jerusalem, Sari Nusseibeh — has garnered signatures from over 156,000 Israelis and 100,000 Palestinians.

Today Israel is a nation whose citizens share an increasing sense of despair about their government's failure to protect them from suicide bombings and terrorist strikes through military actions alone. The Geneva Accord has provided a rare dosage of hope

for a future of peace and security. This can be seen most clearly in the shift of tactics by those opposed to the spirit of Geneva. After first attacking the Accord and its architects as dangerous and traitorous, its detractors now feel compelled to offer competing peace plans. Prime Minister Sharon has even released his own initiative involving unilateral withdrawal from portions of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including the evacuation of some settlements. This is a remarkable political transformation that can lead Israel closer to the elusive goal of peace.

Israel's friends in Congress, such as Representative Lois Capps and Senator Dianne Feinstein, sensing both the urgency of the security crisis facing Israel and the unique promise offered by the Geneva Initiative, have introduced Congressional resolutions (House Resolution 479 and Senate Resolution 276) to support the spirit of the Geneva Initiative. The Jewish community should raise our collective voices to urge our Congressional delegation to cosponsor these resolutions and extend full US diplomatic support for this vital peace initiative. ✨

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Jeremiah S. Gutman

February 25, 2004