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## The Geneva Proposals for Peace: Still Viable?

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Thank you, Mr. Ambassador Freeman. I will try. Good morning everyone.

The Hall of Justice in Geneva was packed with dignitaries, delegates, hardened peaceniks and guests from Palestine, Israel, the Arab world, Europe and the United States. The festive celebration with speeches, music and live performances, correctly and evenly divided between Israelis and Palestinians in joint appearances while a full court of world media was providing sympathetic attention -- an auspicious and promising occasion.

That was the launching of the Geneva Accord, a document that Yossi Beilin described as "a virtual agreement" and Yasser Abed Rabbo hailed as "a triumph of peace and reason" as he held Yossi's hand high and called on an impressive array of stars to join them on the stage. That celebration was followed by a triumphant visit of the delegation to the United States with high profile political meetings and media coverage.

As I recall these events of last December and witness the harsh realities of life grinding away hope and reason in Palestine and Israel, I must admit that I felt at the time that the term virtual was more appropriate than Yossi meant. It meant unreal and unrealistic. It was a premature celebration about what might be and not what is.

The Geneva Accord agreement fleshes out the difficult details of the final status issues that all negotiators or framers of documents about peace have studiously avoided. Courageously and methodically it deals with the contentious issues and proposes solutions that reasonable, patriotic, experienced negotiators worked out with sufficient compromises achieved and red

lines held or shifted to make the overall project achievable. In short, it's a reasonable document signed by reasonable people who care about lasting peace. It represents, by any survey or poll you read, the majority position of Israelis, Palestinians, Arabs, Europeans and Americans, and it's consistent with all the codified international agreements about the Palestine-Israel conflict.

This, unfortunately, is not the full story. It leaves out crucial details -- details about the attitudes and relative power of the people opposed to it. It is my purpose to use the time allotted me today to explore this position, to explore this opposition, what it means and how we can deal with it. It is my contention that the conflict has been unresolved because its main ingredient has not been starkly defined and clearly pursued by its advocates.

The Palestine-Israel conflict has always been one between those who accepted the reality and the finality of the outcome of the war of 1948 and those who never have and seem not to ever to be so inclined. The initial and clear demarcation between Israelis and Jews on the one hand and Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims on the other has defined this conflict in its early years. However, it gradually and imperceptibly shifted and can no more be neatly packaged as Palestinians versus Israelis, Arabs versus Jews, or Muslims against Christians.

For the Palestinians, supported by the majority of Arabs and Muslims, 1948 was injustice personified in the establishment of Israel on 78 percent of the land of Palestine. They suffered a loss of land, country, position, dignity and power and a place of their own. Decades of life and political experience to redress this injustice has educated the majority to the need to accept a historic compromise for a state in the West Bank and Gaza with a capital in Jerusalem in exchange for accepting the permanent reality of the existence of the state of Israel.

The people who oppose this compromise oppose Geneva. They may or may not have given their true reasons for their opposition. They wrapped it either with a religious, leftist, or nationalist rhetorical garb but they have, in essence, opposed a compromise, and hence its credible instrument, Geneva. This does not mean that there were no other reasons for Palestinian opposition. There were, and those reasons need to be talked about publicly and honestly. The right of return: the biggest club was wielded in public to put the Geneva advocates on the defensive and have them fend for themselves against charges of treason. Notwithstanding the detailed section of the finer points about refugees and their redefinition of the right of return that Geneva provided, the perception was created and it stuck, that the negotiators have given up that right.

The reality is that there is a difference between the return and the possibility of return of several million Palestinians to Israel, which is not realistic, and the right - the mere right of the refugees to their possessions that they left in '48. Geneva tried to make that distinction implicitly. In the final analysis, Israel has to find the words to redress the grievances inflicted on the Palestinians in Dinakba (ph) in 1948, and these words given two generations after the fact will help make reconciliation and peace possible. These words should be part of the grand agreement of final peace.

Another legitimate criticism of Geneva is that unauthorized parties negotiated this document in secret. No people have suffered more from lack of democracy and participation with so much at stake as the Palestinian people have. It is right, proper and unavoidable for the implementation of any agreement about their fate to have the people vote on it. It is in this context, and even more so in the context of the impending withdrawal from Gaza, that

Palestinian elections should be held soon. Elections with a referendum on the two-state solution would provide legitimate representatives authorized to make the decisions on behalf of Palestine. It is necessary to point out that Geneva Accord is not an official agreement but a framework for one to be negotiated between elected parties. A conflict this long, which has captured attention of billions of people all over the world cannot and should not be resolved without a public vote. A referendum would provide the ultimate validation of any agreement for the resolution of this conflict.

On the other hand, the Israeli public perceived the people who negotiated the Geneva agreement as left-wing peaceniks. Some of them were branded as traitors and threatened by public officials with legal proceedings. The Israeli counterpart to the Palestinian rejections of the outcome of '48 was equipped with a much more formidable tool to fight with and to discredit Geneva by virtue of its hold on the reigns of government in Israel. Dreams of a greater Israel, at least including Judea and Samaria, the linguistic erasure of the occupation of West Bank and Gaza, dominated the thinking of the military political elite that ruled Israel.

A military solution to them was not only possible but the only way to deal with Palestinians who understand nothing but force. A climate of fear generated by suicide bombings has driven the majority to support the strident policy of the occupation and its iron fist. However, life and political reality have gradually, but obviously not completely, tamed this policy. The withdrawal from Gaza, among other things, is an expression of the limits of military power. Holding on to the West Bank is an expression of the continuation of the idea that 1948 did not define the borders of the final conflict and negotiations by military and other means go on.

These strident policies will, if continued, inevitably and predictably empower the religious extremists in Palestine. Palestinian advocates for peace, with a relentless occupier who offers no possibility of an independent state, will be braded as cowards and weaklings. The upsurge of Hamas and jihad in public polls in the recent years is a harbinger of things to come if present trends are not checked. This is a challenge to me for real political partners across the ethic, national and religious divide. It is their fault if they fail to seek each other and connect.

The political reality at this time is that this is a conflict no more one between Israelis and Palestinians, Arabs and Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is rather between those who accept the presence of two viable states living in peace along each other and those who don't. Palestinians, Israelis, Arabs, Jews, Christians, Muslims are in each camp and those within each camp have much more in common with each other than they do with the tribal affiliates. The political opponents to peace on each side think that time is on their side and in the mean time they have exercised their veto power politically and by force to torpedo Geneva or any accord that will define the end of 1948. The will of the majority has been thwarted and that of an energetic, impassioned, suspicious and violent minority is on the other side.

A viable unoccupied Palestine alongside Israel is the only prescription for peace. It is for this reason that we must keep the roadmap alive and quit making references to its early demise as we must exert all effort to generate political muscle behind the final status outlined by the Geneva Accord. Israel's withdrawal from Gaza can and should be made to fit in this grand vision. The challenges of all parties is to turn this into an opportunity to rebuild a new order in Gaza, one that will be the first solid step for the Palestinians to establish an independent, viable and democratic state.

Israel, for that segment of it that wants security and peace, will have to define its risks on such a move and take them. The Palestinian majority must seize this opportunity to plan and build

rather than to passively watch, complain and assign blame. The United States will be wise to find a way to deliver to the Palestinians tangible benefits to reclaim its credibility as it promises them an acceptable peace. Now more than ever, because of Iraq and the problem of international terrorism, the United States has to exert itself to avoid policies on Palestine that might provide succor to its committed enemies.

Partners of peace on all sides must find each other and roll up their sleeves. The resolution of this defining issue of our time will take vision, courage and toil. Thank you.

(Applause.)

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