

New Peace Initiative Aims To Outflank Sharon

by Dean Andromidas

A new Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative was launched in mid-October to revive the peace movement and outflank Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his hardline government. An Israeli team led by former Israeli justice minister Yossi Beilin, and a Palestinian team led by Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abad Rabbo, drafted an agreement which could form the basis for a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although the draft peace treaty, dubbed the "Geneva agreement," has no official standing, it has been boisterously attacked by Sharon and his right-wing government. Even before it was officially announced, Sharon referred to it as nothing less than a "cynical attempt by Labor and the left to topple the government by illegitimate means."

By contrast, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, although for diplomatic reasons not openly endorsing it, nonetheless expressed public satisfaction with the effort. Abad Rabbo is a strong Arafat loyalist, and has said that the agreement has Arafat's blessing.

Sharon's fear, of what appears to be a "virtual" peace agreement with no official standing, exposes the big lie his government has been brainwashing the Israeli public with: that there is "no one to talk to" among the Palestinians. In a retort to the right-wing attacks against the agreement, Beilin said, "I know that they'll say this is a bad agreement, that we caved in and gave away everything. But one thing they won't be able to say: that there is no partner [for an agreement]." Former Labor Party parliamentary leader Amram Mitzna said of Sharon, "Maybe he is nervous we will burst the illusion that there is no one to talk with and nothing to talk about."

The negotiating leaders will now take the agreement to the Palestinian and Israeli public. They will also seek support for the accord from foreign governments, political leaders, and intellectuals. Both Beilin and Abad Rabbo have already met Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher and Osama al Baz, the special advisor to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

What Should Have Been Agreed at Camp David

A signing of the accord is expected to take place in Switzerland on Nov. 4, the eighth anniversary of the assassination of Israel Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The Swiss Foreign Ministry, one of the sponsors of this project, is organizing the event, and seeking official representation from European and Middle Eastern governments. It is hoped that former Ameri-

can President Jimmy Carter, who is said to have supported the effort, and former President Bill Clinton, will attend.

This Geneva Agreement could have already been a reality if President Clinton had not allowed former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to sabotage the Camp David talks in the Summer of 2000, and if Barak had not allowed Sharon to make his infamous march on the al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in September 2000, which sparked the current Intifada. The drafters say a final settlement agreement like theirs could be completed by 2005, with a sovereign Palestinian State side by side with Israel, whose borders would be finalized for the first time in its history. They also place their effort in the context of the Road Map for a Middle East peace, which has been endorsed by Russia, the European Union, the United Nations and the United States.

The draft (see box) resolves all the outstanding issues. For the Palestinians, it clearly states that they would receive 98% of the West Bank and the balance of 2% will be compensated with a land exchange. It also states which Jewish settlements would be under Palestinian sovereignty, and which would become part of Israel; and defines the capitals of both states. The al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount would be under Palestinian sovereignty while the Western Wall and Jewish Quarter of the Old City would be Israeli. All faiths would have access to these holy sites, with security maintained by an international police force.

Along with recognition of Israel, most important for the Israeli side is a de facto abandonment of the "right of return" by Palestinians to the territory that is now Israel. The right of return will have to be exercised, instead, as a return to the new Palestinian state. These last two concessions by the Palestinians lay to rest the two issues used by Sharon and former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, to claim that the Palestinians do not recognize Zionism and want to destroy the Israeli state, if not with terrorism, then with the right of Palestinian immigration.

Who Backs the Agreement?

The two years' work on the draft document has been supported financially and logistically by a private Swiss foundation and the Swiss Foreign Ministry. In a cover letter sent to Foreign Minister Micheline Camy-Rey, the drafters state that they do not represent their respective peoples in any official or "binding sense"; nonetheless, their "approach represents vast sections of the public opinion on both sides."

The two negotiating teams, especially the Palestinian, represent strong political cross sections of their respective populations. Yasser Abad Rabbo, was the official negotiator for the Palestinians at the 2000 Camp David talks. Considered highly astute and a strong nationalist, he has the full confidence of Arafat, and of former Palestinian prime minister Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) and current Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia.

Others included: Nabil Kassis, a former high-level official of the Palestinian National Authority; Hisham Abdel Razeq,

former Palestinian minister of prisoner affairs; and two leaders of the Fatah-affiliated Tanzim organization, Kadoura Fares and Mohammed Khourani. Fares is said to be close to Fatah head Marwan Barghouti, the most popular Palestinian leader after Arafat and his natural heir. Barghouti, a tough nationalist but equally a strong advocate for a negotiated settlement, is now sitting in an Israeli prison, having been tried for alleged terrorist offenses. Fares announced that Barghouti has given his support to the agreement. Khourani told the press, "We understood that Israel cannot defeat us by military means, but we also understood that we can't defeat Israel, and the solution must be political."

Although the Palestinian population seemed skeptical of the agreement at first, and the agreement got little press coverage, the fact that Sharon and all the members of his insane government have attacked it has created great interest.

The full Israeli team included Yossi Beilin, who drafted the original Oslo Accords and was a former Labor Party minister in the governments of Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak. In the last elections, Beilin left the Labor Party to join Meretz, but failed to win a seat in the Knesset. Others include Knesset Members Haim Oron and Yossi Sarid of Meretz; and Labor Party Members Amram Mitzna, Avraham Burg, and Yuli Tamir. Also included are Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, who was a former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF); former Knesset Member Nehama Ronen of Likud; Brig. Gen. (res.) Giora Inbar; and author Amos Oz.

These Israelis plan to make the agreement the focal point of a revival of the peace camp. Mitzna told *Ha'aretz* on Oct.

13, "The peace camp now has an agenda. We've finished the easy part; now we've come to the hard part—to return to Israel and knock on every door, and convince the public."

It is not only peace groups who will mobilize behind the accord, but a new political party, expected to be created by the end of this year. The long-awaited social-democratic party has been the topic of discussion for over a year. Probably to be called Yahad—Hebrew for "Together"—it would include the five Knesset Members of the Meretz Party, as well as several who would split from the Labor Party, including Mitzna, Tamir, and Burg, who participated in drafting the accord. The One National Party led by Amir Peretz, who is also secretary general of the Histadrut labor federation, is a target to join. Although no longer a Knesset Member, Beilin would be in the running as the new party's leader. It is hoped that a faction of 10 Knesset Members could become the spearhead of an effective parliamentary opposition to the Sharon government.

Sharon's freakout against the accord may help revive the peace camp. One recent poll taken only a few days after the announcement of the agreement, showed that 39% of the Israelis polled said they would support it. Sharon's friends in Washington are not happy either. U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the United States would not support the accord, citing the fact that it is a private initiative. Unless Sharon and his Washington backers blow up the Middle East in the immediate future, the Geneva Accord will become a crucial counterpole to his insane policies, which are responsible for the death of thousands of Palestinians and Israelis.

Heads of the Agreement

The main provisions of the "Geneva Agreement" worked out by a team of Israeli and Palestinians, as published in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* on Oct. 15, include:

- The Palestinians concede the right of return, although some will be able to return to Israel for humanitarian purposes. Although not explicitly stated in the agreement, this is juridically clear, because the Palestinians agree that anyone who requests to return must receive official approval from Israel. The Palestinian refugee problem will be solved through resettlement in the Palestinian state and other countries.
- The Palestinians recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people.
- Israel will withdraw to the 1967 borders, except for certain territorial exchanges.
- East Jerusalem will become part of the Palestinian state with Jewish neighborhoods, and suburbs in the West

Bank, become Israeli.

- The al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount will be Palestinian, but an international force will ensure freedom of access for all faiths. However, Jewish prayer will continue to be forbidden there. The Western Wall will remain under Israeli control. The so-called "Holy Basin" will be under international supervision. This part of the accord is unique in that it details how Jerusalem—the old city, and the various Jewish and Palestinian neighborhoods—will be managed without physically dividing the city.
- The settlements of Ariel, Efrat, and Har Homa will be part of the Palestinian state. These are large settlements that are deep in the West Bank. In addition, Israel would transfer parts of the Negev Desert adjacent to the Gaza Strip, in return for settlements located in the West Bank.
- The Palestinians would pledge to prevent terror and incitement and disarm all militias. The Palestinian state would be demilitarized, and border crossings would be supervised by an international force.
- This agreement would replace all relevant United Nations resolutions.