

**Reiner Bernstein**

**„From Gaza to Geneva“ – Some Remarks About my Book (in German) and the Philosophy Behind It.**

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1.

With all due respect to this conference I am not very happy about the title “From Gaza to Nowhere?”, even it is attached with a question mark. I seems to me that we tend to concentrate our attention too much the bad news which we receive on a daily basis via our media. The executive director of the Palestinian Peace Coalition / Geneva Initiative, Elias Zananiri, said something important at the peace rally in Jerusalem on September 24, and we should care about his words:

"I came here to convey to you a message of peace that, unfortunately, was ignored by your media. Had a number of hooded Palestinians wielding guns invited Israeli journalists to attend a briefing, you would have seen their images day and night on your TV sets. But a peace rally with thousands of Palestinians led by President Mahmoud Abbas does not seem to be a story worth coverage."

Some words about my personal involvement: I am not the official representative of the Geneva Accord in Germany, independency is of high value to me. But I believe that this draft is the only – and unfortunately the last positive one for many years in case of its failure – summary of a concerted effort from both sides to end up with this conflict. Israelis and Palestinians are the only natural allies in the Middle East, since they live in the same country. The future of the Israelis rests on the side of the Palestinians and vice versa. I am rather sorrowful about the recent commentaries in our and the Israeli media telling us that President Machmud Abbas is unable to attain peace. Why? Because the commentaries reflect an understanding of *dejà vu* – all endeavours for peace between the two people are null and void, forget it. Nachum Goldmann once said if the Zionist leaders did not seriously confront themselves with the problems the Jews would experience after their arrival in Palestine, the Zionist project would be a crime.

I am not a lunatic after dealing with this conflict since forty years. But I deeply believe that both peoples have the political and moral strength for peace. That's the answer to the question of my engagement with the Geneva Initiative.

2.

All political governments around the world are committed to the “peace process.” But they ignore that this word came into being in the mid-70s, when Henry Kissinger roamed around between Israel, Egypt, and Syria for contracts of military disengagement in Sinai and the Golan Heights. The application of this word to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is problematic, since in this arena we find a deeply rooted existence of asymmetry in terms of legitimacy and sovereignty. Legitimacy and sovereignty are the central concepts to evaluate the quality of policy in this battle.

The political and international unevenness is lasting to this day. The Oslo Agreements were no treaties, since Yitzhak Rabin represented an interna-

tional recognized state, while Yasser Arafat was the leader of an NGO, the PLO. I remind you of the sentence of Shimon Peres who spoke of the “trial period” during the time of Palestinian autonomy: Further progress, so he said, depends on the behaviour of the Palestinians. In a chapter of another book of mine I called Oslo the successful way of thwarted Palestinian symmetry.

Why Camp David failed? Since then many diplomats, participants, and advisers laid down their experiences in books, many more in articles. I refer especially to Shlomo Ben-Ami<sup>1</sup>, Yossi Beilin<sup>2</sup>, Gilad Sher<sup>3</sup>, Menachem Klein<sup>4</sup>, Dennis Ross<sup>5</sup>, Charles Enderlin<sup>6</sup>, and Clayton Swisher<sup>7</sup>. To my mind Camp David failed because of high-ranking expectations: to reach a comprehensive and final agreements without proper preparations within two weeks.

3.

What are the prospects of the Geneva Initiative? Will they lead no nowhere, as the title of this conference will make us to believe?

After Camp David and the continuing stake of President Billy Clinton which did not produce any results, members of the Palestinian and Israeli team headed by Yasser Abed Rabbo and Yossi Beilin took the lead to establish informal channels of conversations about a detailed and all-inclusive model of a “partnership in peace.” After more than two years they offered solutions for the most disputed questions: a) the establishment of the Palestinian state within the borders of 1967, providing the possibility of some territorial exchanges; b) the dissolution of the Jewish settlements within the prospective Palestinian state; c) the establishment of the Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem; d) the solution of the Palestinian refugee problem via four options, and finally e) bilateral security arrangements. A provision I personally missed in the draft was that no word came about the growing role of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel. But I think that this omission is on its way to be reconsidered and perhaps resolved.

All these central problems, mentioned above, were cautiously circumvented by the responsible governments. Mainly they dealt with security arrangements and intentional declarations of political involvement.

The philosophy of the Geneva Initiative is “interim solutions yes” but not without the political horizon of a final endgame according to the proposals of Geneva. Of course there are 49 annexes to be dealt with, but when I summarize the objections to Geneva I come to the conclusion that the opponents do not want peace at all, because they are anxious of a sell-out of so-called holy national interests – on the Jewish-Israeli side especially the relinquishment of Samaria, Judea and East Jerusalem as the cradle of

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<sup>1</sup> Front Without a Rearguard (in Hebrew). 2004.

<sup>2</sup> The Peace to Geneva. 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Just beyond Reach (in Hebrew). 2001.

<sup>4</sup> The Jerusalem Problem. The Struggle for Permanent Status. 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Missing Peace. 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Shattered Dreams. 2003.

<sup>7</sup> The Truth About Camp David. 2004.

Jewish civilization, on the Palestinian side the renunciation of the right of return of the Palestinian refugees.

4.

Those who are familiar with Israeli discussions know that there was a growing influence of constitutional discussions about the status of the West Bank. Their proponents were justices like Meir Shamgar – president of the High Court of Justice between 1984 and 1995 –, Yehuda Z. Blum – professor for International Law at the Hebrew University and Israeli ambassador to the United Nations –, and ambassador Netanel Lorch. They proposed that Israel has a decent claim to sovereignty over the West Bank since not even the Arab governments had recognized the annexation of this territory by Jordan in 1950, and because Amman had broken the internationally distinguished act of non-belligerency by participating in the war of 1967. Lately – before the withdrawal from Gaza –, the Israeli Foreign Office once again distributed on its homepage a declaration which characterized the West Bank as “disputed territory.”

What I want to explain is the growing importance of a fundamentalist political assessment in religious terms. The religious establishment in Judaism and Islam conquered the political arena since 1967 – the hard-core of the settler community here and the Muslim Brotherhood and their followers in “Hamas” there. In Israel Zionism is defined today as “Yeshiva Zionism” (Yoram Hazony), among the Palestinians we discover the renaissance of the “umma” – the unity of the Arab-Islamic nation which declares the belonging of Palestine an inseparable and indispensable part of the Islamic endowment (“waqf”).

Therefore, one important question for the proponents of the ideas of the Geneva Initiative is this: How realistic is the two-state solution? Is “Gaza first Gaza last”, as Ariel Sharon is busy to strengthen the Israeli presence in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, not the speak about the character of the “separation fence” as aspired political borders? What does he mean when he proclaims his intentions to be instrumental in a viable and sovereign Palestinian state? The other way round: Is the so-called “binational option” a device for a peaceful solution? An Israeli observers, Gershon Baskin, wrote some days ago:

„Palestinian intellectuals, observing the continuous nibbling away of the West Bank by separation wall and barrier, the expansion of settlements, and the many by-pass roads, doubt the possibility of the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. These elites have started reconsidering their backing of a two-state solution and instead are advocating the principle of one man one vote, and one bi-national state for both peoples. This trend is growing by the day among the intellectuals and eventually will spill over to the Palestinian public at large, as the only worthwhile deliverance from the hopelessness of ever achieving an equitable two-state solution<sup>8</sup>.”

I personally have some experience with the idea of a bi-national state. Intellectually it radiates a wide range of attraction. Two peoples in one country, wrote Martin Buber more than 70 years ago, a country with a history and a geography which are dear to Palestinians and Jews. But after that incessant follow-ups of hundred years of bloodshed, hatred, and frus-

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<sup>8</sup> Gershon Baskin in „Jerusalem Times“ 28.10.2005.

tration? With the necessary provision of “one man one vote?” With two different cultural and economic civilizations? Maybe a project of the twenty-second century. The Palestinians must experience for a historical second the feeling of liberation and national sovereignty, Faisal Hussein once said. All other solutions depend on this occurrence.

But is Machmud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority strong enough stemming to the tide of the Palestinian opposition insisting on the full-fledged right of return for the refugees – that means their children and grandchildren – and to restrict the Islamic fundamentalists? What would be the outcome after the elections on January 25, when “ Hamas” mobilizes major parts of Palestinians behind their program? It is a outstanding task of the Israeli peace camp to support Machmud Abbas, since he is the only one who is the authentic proponent of the Geneva Initiative, as was once again confirmed by his attendance at the peace rally in Ramallah on September 24.

5.

Looking into the history of unsuccessful foreign interventions to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict it is very doubtful to me that the “Road Map” is a consequential means to this purpose. The “Road Map” makes any political progress dependant on the end of Palestinian violence, confusing cause and effect – if we do not believe in a Palestinian genetic flaw. The “Road Map” speaks of the dissolution of the “illegal outposts” providing the impression that the settlements established after 1967 are legal. Since Europe is no major factor in the Middle East – “a payer, not a player”, as some European legislators and diplomats confessed self-critically – the only power is the U.S.A. Yossi Beilin said at the event of the peace rally on September 24:

“The support of the world is important for us. But the main struggle will be take place here – in the parliament, on the streets, to end this conflict, to end the occupation, and to end to curse with which we live since 38 years.”

When my wife and I met Palestinians and Israelis in May and June this year, when we spoke to journalists, to politicians, and to NGO representatives we got the impression that Condoleezza Rice is the first American secretary of state who seriously reads the daily reports of the American embassy in Tel Aviv and of the U.S. General Consulate in Jerusalem. With regard to the extensive blaze in Iraq, Washington is entangled with, Rice might be considering to extinguish the bush fire between Israelis and Palestinians. What price will both parties have to pay?

6.

I believe in evaluating political and geographical contexts. Iraq is one of them. Other extensions are the rule of law, the situation of human rights in the Arab world, freedom of press and opinion, women rights and so on.

All these factors are also important in the theatre we deal with today. That's why I appreciate the work of the Tel Aviv and Ramallah offices of the Geneva Initiative with their visiting tours alongside the “separation fence”, the lectures with people in cities and villages, in refugee camps, the educational efforts with adults and youth, their attention to influence public opinion by articles and appearances in the media. Being in Jerusalem those days we observed Chaim Yavin's TV-series “Land of the Settlers” and the

following arguments pro and con. I am eager to hear the resonance of Akiva Eldar's and Idith Zertal's book "Lords of the Land." The way to peace is step by step without dropping the destination: legitimacy and sovereignty for the Palestinians, legitimacy for the Israelis.

When I read the bulletins of both offices I am impressed by their efforts – knowing simultaneously that this is part and parcel of many other attempts in the field. I would like to refer once again to Elias Zananiri of the Ramallah office on September 24:

"We need to launch one campaign after the other to make sure that people's mindset is changed into accepting coexistence with the other first, and then taking into taking to the streets to demand that this goal be implemented by governments."

Yossi Beilin reminded the participants of the peace rally in Jerusalem the same day.

"An Israel making peace is a stronger, not a weaker Israel. Peace you make after bloody wars. Peace you make in spite of feelings of hatred and mistrust. Peace you make before and not after you have won the confidence of the other side."

Any other solution than those presented by the Geneva Initiative teams are destined to prolong violence, blood, and political and religious extremism. Time is running out. We have to decide how we can support our friends in peace.

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