

Geneva Accord better than violence
By Samuel G. Freedman
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When the al-Aksa intifada erupted three years ago, convulsing the Oslo peace process in Palestinian terrorism and Israeli reprisals, the prevailing opinion held that after all the bloodletting both sides would return to the negotiating table, realizing there was finally no alternative to a two-state solution.

By now, that conventional wisdom has proven to be dreadfully wrong. Extremists in both the Palestinian and Israeli camps, and even some mainstream American and European intellectuals, have for a variety of reasons begun campaigning for a single bi-national state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Even without any formal action toward such a state, the combination of increasing Israeli settlements in the occupied territories and a soaring Palestinian birth rate will soon enough leave two hostile populations entwined in a death embrace. History tells us such an outcome would lead to communal violence that would make this intifada seem like a New England town meeting.

Against such a backdrop, the informal, unofficial peace treaty forged between Palestinian and Israeli political figures and signed earlier this week in Geneva represents the best chance in years of reviving the concept of two states for two peoples. One need not believe the model agreement is flawless to find in it one of the only causes for cautious optimism since September 2000.

Far from what right-wing and even many centrist Israeli critics have contended, the treaty does not reward Palestinians for their campaign of suicide bombings. Far from what the rejectionists of Hamas and Islamic jihad have contended, the treaty does not betray Palestinian national aspirations.

Rather, the so-called Geneva Accord gives concrete meaning to those notions of "painful concessions" and a "peace of the brave" that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat have periodically voiced without ever providing any specificity or action. The agreement points the way for each side in the conflict to surrender its fantasies.

Palestinians would surrender their dream of reclaiming homes they fled or abandoned 55 years ago in what is now sovereign Israel, and in return would receive a sovereign nation of their own. Israelis would surrender their dream of reclaiming the Biblical heartlands of Judea and Samaria, and in return would receive a secure and internationally recognized border. Jerusalem and its holiest sites would be divided in ways that, practically speaking, they already are.

A permanent agreement is hardly imminent, of course; it may be years away. Enacting the Geneva plan may have to wait until Sharon (who denounces it) and Arafat (who characteristically vacillates and dissembles) are gone from power. And that cannot happen until each leader's public comes to believe there is some way back from perpetual war.

The chief negotiators, former Israeli Cabinet minister Yossi Beilin and former Palestinian information minister Yasir Abed Rabbo, had good reason for pursuing their talks secretly over the past two and a half years. Since the accord became public, Beilin has been branded a rogue and saboteur by fellow Jews, while Rabbo's house has been shot at and several members of his negotiating team have been physically threatened by Palestinian militants.

Yet their example of peacemaking from below--or at least peacemaking from the outside in--has struck some chord. Polls by the Baker Institute for Public Policy found a slight majority of both Israelis and Palestinians supporting the major principles of the accord. A subsequent opinion survey by the Tel Aviv newspaper Haaretz put Israeli backing for the plan more in the 30 percent range, but with a sizeable chunk of respondents undecided.

The signing ceremony in Switzerland, meanwhile, attracted the endorsement of world leaders including Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela, and Lech Walesa. Their presence serves as a reminder of what each side has to gain from the international community--for the Palestinians, money to rebuild the infrastructure destroyed because of their self-defeating uprising, and for Israelis, an end to diplomatic quarantine.

For American Jews, the Geneva Accord can reopen a meaningful internal debate about peacemaking. Even during the heyday of the Oslo process, that discussion was dominated, perhaps deservedly so, by peace-process foes who were more passionate and better mobilized than the lackadaisical majority that favored the land-for-peace formula. The murderous attacks on Israeli civilians during the intifada--especially the suicide bombing at a Passover seder in April 2002--drove liberal American Jews into a state of paralysis, if not despair, and left them, like their Israeli counterparts, reluctant to ever again trust the Arafat regime as a peace partner.

But if the Geneva Accord is to be simply undermined, then what options remain? To annex the West Bank and give its Palestinian multitudes token rights, as the Israeli settlers propose? To watch ever greater power and influence obtain to the Islamist fanatics ready to pay with their own lives for a Palestine "from the river to the sea"? To feel guilty, throw up your hands, and say Israel shouldn't be a Jewish state anymore, as such intellectuals as Tony Judt have done?

Some of us hoped the separation wall offered a way to short-circuit the cycle of terrorism and counterattack, to buy enough calm for moderates to safely emerge. But instead of being built along the 1967 border the wall is cutting deeply into the West Bank, promising to generate only more violence. Which leaves one realization. Whatever its

drawbacks, however powerless its authors, the Geneva Accord offers the faint, flickering pilot light of possibility.

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