

Wolfowitz supports Nusseibeh-Ayalon Peace Plan, Ha'aretz, 10/31/03

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The United States Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz expressed his support Thursday for the "People's Voice" initiative drawn up by former Shin Bet chief Ami Ayalon and President of the Al-Quds University Sari Nusseibeh.

The two presented Wolfowitz with the main principles of the plan during a meeting in Washington last week. Wolfowitz said that plan was very similar in nature to the road map to Middle East peace, the internationally-brokered plan envisioning a two-state solution by 2005. According to the the People's Voice Web site, some 94,000 Israelis and 60,000 Palestinians have signed up for the plan, which also calls for a two-state solution, as well as an end to the Palestinian right of return to lands within the State of Israel. During a lecture at Georgetown University in Washington, Wolfowitz said that achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians was important in order to encourage moderate elements in the Middle East. He praised the initiative of Ayalon and Nusseibeh, calling it a significant public movement.

Wolfowitz said that change could come from the bottom up, and that there would be significant progress in Middle East peace talks if Israelis and Palestinians showed wide support for compromise and resistance to terror, which he said was the main obstacle to regional peace. In his lecture, Wolfowitz lauded the brave leaders who brought peace between Israel and Egypt, mentioning Egypt's Anwar Sadat, Jordan's King Hussein and Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres. Wolfowitz, the most senior Jewish official in the Bush administration's diplomatic-security staff, is considered to be the most prominent speaker of the "neo-conservative" group in the Republican Party, and the ideologue behind the Iraq war.

Blair welcomes Geneva Accord

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said on Thursday an unofficial plan for Middle East peace that has been dismissed by the Israeli government was a welcome contribution to the debate over the region's future. It is separate to the U.S.-backed "road map" for Middle East peace, which has been derailed by persistent violence. The Palestinians and Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon back the road map, albeit with reservations on the Israeli side.

Blair, who was asked about the initiative at a news conference last week, said on Thursday such a contribution to the stalled peace process was not counterproductive. "At this time both people need hope. This initiative gives them a chance to look beyond current difficulties to what might be achievable with goodwill on both sides," Blair said.

"I hope that the initiative will stimulate debate, remind people of why peace is worth

working for, show that Israelis and Palestinians remain capable of finding partners for peace and working together, and encourage them back to the negotiating table." But he added: "Tackling security remains the essential first step towards this or any other settlement."

The "Geneva Agreement" is a symbolic effort by Israel's opposition to show negotiations are possible and covers arrangements such as borders, the division of Jerusalem and Jewish settlements.