



On the Ground with Israelis and Palestinians

This is the first installment of a tour report covering our travels in Israel and the occupied territories this past March and April. You'll find highlights of conversations with leaders and activists involved in a variety of initiatives aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and addressing the damage the conflict has done. This installment covers meetings with five Jewish Israelis and four Palestinians. Next week, we will report on our travels through Israel and the occupied territories.

In addition to our more formal meetings, we visited with Aliza's family, as well as the family of Director of Chapter and Grassroots Development Carinne Luck. We saw a postcard written by Theodore Herzl to Carinne's great-great grandfather, asking him personally to found the Anglo-Palestine Bank – today Bank Leumi. Aliza's uncle showed us a letter (in Yiddish!) that David Ben Gurion had written to his father assuring him that his young son was safe in the brand-new country of Israel. They say that each life of every Israeli and Palestinian could make an interesting book, and we found nothing to debunk this.

-- Aliza Becker, Deputy Director and Sue Swartz, Board of Directors

- Talking with **Dr. Naomi Chazan**, Former Deputy Speaker of the Knesset and Professor, Hebrew University
- Talking with **Dr. Mohammed Dajani**, founder of Wasatia and Professor, Al-Quds University
- Talking with **MK Yossi Belin**, Chairperson of the Meretz Party
- Talking with **Saman Houry**, General Manager, Peace and Democracy Forum, and **Nidal Foqaha**, Executive Director, Palestinian Peace Coalition
- Talking with **Dr. Gaila Golan**, Peace Now and Professor, Hebrew University
- Talking with **Fouad Kokali**, head of the Fatah Council in Bethlehem and member, Palestinian Legislative Council
- Talking with **Gadi Baltiansky**, Director General of The Geneva Initiative and **General (ret.) Shlomo Brom**, The Institute for National Security Studies

WOULD YOU MAKE A DEAL?



Sue Swartz, Naomi Chazan, Aliza Becker

It is always a pleasure to sit and talk with Naomi Chazan, former Deputy Speaker of the

Knesset, long-time women's rights and peace activist, and Professor of Political Science and African Studies. She is blunt, focused, a self-described realist, and somehow manages to keep her sense of humor. She begins by telling us that "the next two months will be a total tailspin. You can set your calendar by all the major dates."

Finance Minister Abraham Hirschson will be forced out over the embezzlement charges he now faces, she says. The April 28 release of the Winograd Commission's report on the Lebanon War will be scathing. Then comes President Katsav's hearing on May 2, where he will face two counts of rape, followed by the Labor Party primaries in late May with Barak, Ayalon, and Peretz fighting it out.

"Would you make a peace deal with this government?" Chazan joked. "What we have in Israel makes Abbas look strong." Of course, this is a serious situation – with several possible scenarios: dissolution of the government, reshuffling of party and personnel alignment, Olmert leaves while Kadima remains in power. Chazan didn't want to place her bets on how everything would play itself out, but she did think a complete collapse was unlikely.

TIME IS ON NO ONE'S SIDE

When we mentioned to Chazan that several people repeated the expression "time wasn't on Israel's side", she replied: time is on no one's side in the Middle East. Her concerns are these:

- She is worried that the Saudi Initiative will be ignored or put off, though there has "never been a better proposal to Israel," a framework that the country could only have imagined in the past, one that guarantees an end to Arab-Israeli conflict and normalization of relations.
- She is worried about unilateralism – she sees the concept slowly creeping back into the public statements of government officials, even as the talks between Mahmoud Abbas and Ehud Olmert takes place. Israel's diplomatic and economic boycott of the Palestinian Authority unity government is predictable, but wrong-headed.
- She is worried about the power vacuum on both sides of the conflict, and what role Islamic extremists might play in a continuing status quo (or worse).

And Chazan is also worried that in the absence of concrete policies and substantial movement, the Israeli public has become tuned out, turned off, tired, and lacking faith. Israelis, as a general rule, "tend to like whatever the official policy is", and without a real policy, they become disconnected from the conversation.

NO SENSE GIVING UP

Aren't you depressed about all this, we asked. Isn't it difficult to have hope?

"Ah," Chazan replied, "I am not an optimist or a pessimist. I am a realist. Without policy, people are indeed disconnected. But there is also an opening. There is a time for boldness and alternatives." An Israeli proposal at this point, she explains – even by a Prime Minister under siege, heading up a weakened coalition – would provide critical movement and involve minimal risk.

Her last piece of advice? Don't wait until after the U.S. Presidential elections. Start influencing the candidates on the issue now.

SEEKING MODERATION





Mohammed Dajani

The Arabic word "wasat" means "middle of the road" or "center of the circle" – a balance of extremes between rich and poor, high and low, empty and full, courage and cowardice. Its English equivalent is moderation, its use in the Qur'an is justice and goodness. The concept of al-wasatia emphasizes avoidance of extremes, the rejection of radicalism.

Six months ago Mohammed Dajani, chair of the American Studies Department at [Al Quds University](#), founded a new political party – [Wasatia](#) – based on this concept of moderation. His vision is not a secular one, but rather one which speaks to the issues of co-existence, freedom, and individual rights from within the Islamic tradition

"The middle ground is what God wants for us," Dajani tells us (as we sit once again in the American Colony Hotel). "Religion is being hijacked and misrepresented. Palestinian society is moderate, but being pushed to extremism and fundamentalism. This is not the Islam we were raised on – the Islam with more than 500 passages about peace in its holy book – this is not our culture." The idea of a clash of religions and civilizations is nonsense, according to this view. The investment must be made in dialogue, co-existence, mediation, and education – particularly in education.

IMMEDIATE GOALS

Dajani's goal is to lay the groundwork from now until the next round of elections – not to win, but to get people acquainted with Wasatia and its vision. The focus will be on 5 sectors in Palestinian society:

- Moderate religious leaders
- Prisoners and ex-prisoners
- Women
- Young people, aged 18 to 25
- University and high school teachers

This list is quite strategic: Moderate religious leaders can speak in mosques and other venues, spreading the message of moderation yet further; booklets for prisoners are being developed, as they have time on their hands for reading and considering new ideas; materials are being developed for teachers at all levels of education, since it's crucial to reach young people "when their flower is in bloom".

Dajani is particularly concerned with women. He sees them as increasingly disenfranchised and victimized, limited in their ability to move freely, being pushed back into the home – all in the name of religion, and reinforced by peer pressure. At Al Quds University, almost all Muslim women wear a head covering, a significant change from four years ago when such symbols of Islam were rare.

CAPTURING THE SILENT MAJORITY

Dajani is motivated by the belief that the only way to capture the silent majority is through the work of Wasatia, of co-existence. He wants interfaith dialogue focused exclusively on the concept of moderation in the three religions, "maybe if we can know each other better, than we can communicate better". In his view, this is the only way to deal with the essential dilemma between the Western world and the Muslim community. The West addresses the Islamic world using the Western lexicon, but it would be better – far better – to use the language and concepts of the Qur'an. Arab terms such as intifada, fatwa, and jihad have all entered into the consciousness of the Western world – Dajani believes it is time for the concept of Wasatia to be recognized as part of the dialogue between our cultures as well.

“WHAT YOU ARE DOING IS AMAZING”



Yossi Beilin, Sue Swartz

Thus began our meeting with Yossi Beilin, Chairperson of [Meretz](#) and lead Israeli negotiator of the 2003 Geneva Initiative. Ushered into Beilin’s office on schedule, and each with a cup of freshly made coffee, we were greeted with accolades (“grassroots organizing is Brit Tzedek’s biggest success”) as well as questions: What are you going to ask your members to do this year? How will you keep things fresh? How will you make sure that the “other” Jewish view, the majority view, will be heard?

Against a backdrop of an Israeli flag and family photographs, Beilin told us of his optimism concerning recent developments – an optimism tempered by the lack of energy in the Prime Minister’s office. “I’ve had enough ‘don’t talks’. We’re not too far from a solution, but the solution isn’t inevitable,” he explained.

A TIME FOR OPTIMISM

Although Beilin is frustrated with both the current Israeli and American administrations – “Rice may be wasting her time” – he believes that more people in official and unofficial capacities are realizing that they must move before time runs out. In his recent speech before the U.S. Congress, for example, Jordan’s King Abdullah specifically mentioned the Geneva Initiative, with its clear parameters for a peace agreement; and the Arab League’s steps on the Arab Initiative.

And he believes that the Palestinian Unity Government is a good sign. “We don’t give the Unity Government enough credit,” Beilin told us. It is an important milestone in that created real Palestinian consensus in dealing with Israel, a consensus that is backed by the majority of the Palestinians themselves. The Palestinian government should be judged not only what it says, but additionally by its actions, particularly ending violence against Israel.

THE ROLE OF AMERICAN JEWS AND BRIT TZEDEK

Six years without negotiations is too long. Though we won’t see much out of the Bush administration, that doesn’t mean that American Jews should take a vacation. It is crucial, Beilin urged us, that the American Jewish community press for negotiations. Specifically, he suggested the following:

- enlarge the coalition – and thus strengthen the voices – of those who speak to Congress in a pro-peace voice;
- develop the leadership of younger people, the next generation of activists;
- educate leaders in the American political community, both Jewish and non-Jewish, on the issues – invite Geneva Initiative staff to an educational briefing on Capital Hill;
- brainstorm ways to bring Congressional leadership and their staff members to the Middle East. If they are planning a trip already, work with their staff to schedule a meeting with the leadership of the Geneva Initiative
- seek out up-and-coming political leaders and build alliances with them;

- establish relations with all of the Presidential candidates now.

WE FACE PROBLEMS WHEN WE TALK ABOUT PEACE



Saman Khoury, Sue Swartz, Nidal Foqaha, Aliza Becker

High Tea at East Jerusalem's American Colony Hotel with its Ottoman architecture and elaborate tapestries seems like an improbable place for a meeting with the Palestinian representatives of the Geneva Initiative – but the stately hotel is a popular mid-way point, literally and figuratively, between West and East, close to the checkpoints leading to the West Bank and an easy taxi ride from West Jerusalem.

Saman Khoury, member of the Palestinian negotiating team and General Manager of the [Peace and Democracy Forum](#) in East Jerusalem, and Nidal Foqaha, Executive Director of the [Palestinian Peace Coalition](#) in Ramallah began simply: "We face a lot of problems when we talk about peace." Both men, with deep roots in Palestinian politics, speak of the need for strengthening moderate voices, for bringing non-violence and co-existence to the forefront, to work towards the "end-game of Geneva".

Peace may be hard to talk about, but they do it. They bring Palestinians and Israelis together, educate young Palestinian leaders and politicians, and present the Geneva Initiative to local officials and ordinary citizens throughout the West Bank.

PEACE IS POSSIBLE

"Once we take the time to explain, the better reception it [the Geneva Initiative] has", Foqaha says. Five thousand copies of the agreement were distributed in the occupied territories in 2003-04, and the full text printed in Palestinian newspapers. He hands each of us a copy of the Initiative with its cover in soft-hued green, black, and red emblazoned with the words PEACE IS POSSIBLE.

Khoury tells of a friendlier atmosphere for Palestinian moderates. "The events of the last few years have taken us off track," he says, "but now we want to exist as a unified people. Now we want to exist as part of the larger world." Indeed, the primary goals of the [Palestinian Peace Coalition](#) are not only to build a broad peace coalition based on a vision of a "realistic political solution based on Geneva", but also to:

- enhance acceptance of the ideals of peace and tolerance
- reduce stereotypes and prejudice among Palestinians toward all of their peace partners
- increase respect among Palestinians toward each other
- demonstrate that violence leads nowhere except to further pain and destruction, and stress that a negotiated settlement is the only way to end the conflict with mutual respect and understanding

- empower Palestinian civil society through debates on equality, democracy, and discrimination.

GRASSROOTS & POLITICAL ACTION

There has been a change in the last year, Khoury tells us, a bigger change in the past year than in the previous twenty. With the Palestinian National Unity Government and the revived Saudi Initiative, the atmosphere for Palestinian moderates has improved. There is an opening, and it's clear that Khoury, Foqaha, and their colleagues helped lay the groundwork.

In the last three years, PPC has produced 12 talk shows; organized a photo exhibition on the Separation Wall; published 38 issues of Attareek/The Road, a monthly newspaper with a circulation over 20,000; held several dozen town meetings throughout the West Bank; sponsored a festival of Freedom and Independence in Ramallah with a crowd estimated at 12,000; ran 25 youth camps; and more.....

There are also joint Israeli-Palestinian groupings which offer a chance to socialize, build relations, and establish common ground for peace. These meetings – sometimes held in other countries, sometimes in “grey areas” accessed through gaps in the security barrier – give both sides a chance to see past the familiar stereotypes of settler and terrorist.

“Support for our activities must come from the international community,” they stress as we take our leave of the American Colony. It is hard to talk about peace, but we must.

WE’VE ALL GOT A LOT OF WORK TO DO



Galia Golan, Sue Swartz

The first words out of Galia Golan’s mouth – as we began our meeting in a busy Tel Aviv coffee shop – were not upbeat. Golan, an activist with [Peace Now](#) since 1978 and distinguished Professor of Political Science, gave us her grim diagnosis: people don’t give a damn. This government won’t do a thing – with Olmert, the peace process is all talk. The Palestinians don’t seem to be getting their act together. No one is happy with the situation, but they’re apathetic. Only the settlers are mobilizing. The easiest thing for those in power is to do nothing, all under the guise of “no partner”.

It’s almost like Golan is giving us a painful inoculation – whether against the reality of Israeli politics or against our own sense of optimism. When we point this out to her, she pauses. “Yes, I’m finally pessimistic,” she admits, “but I still go on with the work.” In fact, she has squeezed this meeting with us in just before she is to appear on a panel addressing the Saudi Peace Initiative, and tomorrow there is a demonstration outside the Prime Minister’s residence calling on him to respond positively to the initiative, and after that....

BUT ACTIVISM GOES ON

“The young people make a difference,” Golan begins when we ask if there’s any hope. New activists are coming into the peace movement, with new ideas and energy. There was a demonstration in Hebron protesting the government’s continued support for the untenable situation where 500 settlers regularly proscribe the daily lives of 35,000 Palestinians, and another is planned in protest of the new settlement in Hebron, really an invasion of a large house (called, incredibly, Beit Shalom, or “house of peace.” by the

settlers) located between the veteran settlement of Kiryat Arba and the Cave of the Patriarchs.

And there is more positive news: More and more experts and generals are speaking out about the war in Lebanon and the reliance on military solutions. The anti-Iran rhetoric has lessened, and there are fewer scare tactics used in the press or by politicians. And even with the perceived threats of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, the polls show no drop in support for a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The majority in both Israel and Palestine have long since accepted a two-state solution, Golan reminds us. Time is running out, though. Israel cannot wait out the Palestinians, unless we want a one-state solution – which is clearly not an option.

So what should American Jews do? Golan, who grew up in the U.S. and moved to Israel in 1966, had this advice:

- keep doing grassroots and advocacy work
- tell the real story of what's happening here
- provide a counterbalance to the hawkish message of much of the Jewish establishment, and make sure the opinion of the majority of American Jews – those who want a negotiated, two-state solution – is heard.

How the U.S. treats Israel is unbelievably crucial, for only Washington can get Israel to move. We've all got a lot of work to do, Golan concluded, and with that went off to her next event.

OBSTACLES TO PEACE



Fouad Kokali

Fouad Kokali, head of the Fatah Council in Bethlehem and a member of the [Palestinian Legislative Council](#), began his talk with the words "Israel is not interested in a Palestinian state". The obstacles to peace are four, said Kokali: the settlements; confiscation of land for the bypass roads in the West Bank; squeezing the cities so that they have no land for growth; and Israeli non-interest in an agreement.

For the next 45 minutes, Kokali – who is also a former mayor of Beit Sahur, and who spent five years in Israeli prisons – outlined the Fatah position to us and a lobby filled with students from Stanford University. "Palestinians feel that Israelis don't want the State," he told us point-blank, "They created checkpoints, carry out targeted assassinations. We don't have a partner. Though the Israelis say they want peace, we don't know what they mean when they say peace."

Because of internal differences within the Palestinian Legislative Council, there were times when it was impossible to tell whether Kokali was speaking for himself, Fatah, the Palestinian people, or the unity government. He was adamant that Palestinians accept the

conditions of the Quartet, renounce violence, and recognize Israel; that “we did our part of the Road Map”. Before any of us could clarify his remarks, Kokali began to speak about the dangers of unilateralism. The withdrawal from Gaza was not really a withdrawal, but rather a change in the form of control, a change in how policies were carried out. And in Lebanon (in 2000), Israel discovered that unilateralism did not provide a solution – that talks are necessary.

WHICH ISRAEL SHOULD WE RECOGNIZE?

Palestinians are prepared to be pragmatic, argued Kokali, but they cannot take less than what the rest of the Arab world finds essential. More than half of Palestinians believe that there should be mutual recognition between Israel and Palestine. Negotiations always reflect the comparative power of the parties involved – if the 1967 borders and the issue of refugees are not addressed in a dialogue (rather than demands and unilateralism) then there will be anger and frustration.

These factors – anger and frustration – are also why Palestinians voted for Hamas in last year’s elections. There was no peace community that could provide a vision, there was a mistrust of international policies, and Fatah made mistakes in governing (though corruption was not one of them). This is why the unity government is good for the Palestinians, argued Kokali: they can be together.

Of the immediate prospects for peace-making, he was not optimistic. The Arab Initiative is very important, but “Israel is not ready for peace and the Americans are not ready to push”. Israel can, and should, be a natural part of the Middle East, Kokali told us. There is a benefit to living in peace, there is a way to live without fear. But Israel is not ready to take responsibility for the historical disaster experienced by the Palestinians, and this is an issue.

“We recognize Israel,” Kokali concluded, “of course we recognize Israel. But when you look at the checkpoints, the jails, the reality of occupation.... which Israel should we recognize? That is the important question.”

YES TO AN AGREEMENT



Gadi Baltianski. Aliza Becker,
Brigadier General (ret.) Shlomo Brom

“The tragedy,” said Gadi Baltiansky, Director General of [The Geneva Initiative](#) (GI), “is that both sides agree what the general outline will look like. The real discussion is over – we know how it will look, more or less”. After six years without negotiations, disappointment over disengagement (as the rockets still fall in Sderot), the election of Hamas, and last summer’s war in Lebanon, Baltiansky could see a clear loss of hope in Israeli society – just as he could see an awakened focus on the Geneva “process”: permanent status talks aimed at forging a two-state solution.

When the Geneva Initiative was first announced in December 2003, polls indicated just under 40% support. With unilateralism now mostly off the table (including among Kadima politicians) and public discourse once again turning to negotiations, a recent Tel Aviv

University poll found 56% support for negotiations with the present Palestinian unity government.

MOBILIZING FOR NEGOTIATIONS

Baltiansky sees the Israeli grassroots as key to influencing the decision-makers. While members of the GI work closely with Israeli decision makers, they are also working with the grassroots – mobilizing individuals and groups who can, in turn, persuade the people who have the power to say “let’s talk” – and mean it. A crucial piece to this mobilization is education, being exposed to the facts on the ground. Consider this partial list of activities of the Israeli branch of the GI this year:

- meetings with the heads of Labor Party local cells
- presentations to high school students, ages 16 and 17, focused on the conflict’s two different narratives
- tours of the security fence around Jerusalem specifically for Russian-speaking Israelis from Ukraine and Kazakstan
- Jerusalem-area tour for Arab-Israeli teachers and principals
- briefing for young media figures (print, radio, television) on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- briefing for Parliamentary assistants (akin to Congressional staff) on the latest developments
- discussion with leadership from two Regional Councils

And that’s not all. This year also saw the 6th edition of Triangle: Try A Different Angle, a youth newspaper written in Hebrew and Arabic by Israeli and Palestinian students – and distributed at universities and colleges on both sides of the Green Line. Then there was a week of special programs on All for Peace Radio and two meetings between highly placed Israeli and Palestinian politicians to share information and brainstorm ways to move the peace process forward.

IS THERE HOPE?

About halfway through the meeting, Brigadier General (ret.) Shlomo Brom introduced a few caveats into our otherwise upbeat conversation. The first: the weakness of the two main parties to the negotiations. The second: major issues of “right of return” by Palestinian refugees and Jerusalem (the city’s borders, and sovereignty over religious sites). The third: Hamas non-recognition of Israel, even as most Palestinians support the Fatah vision of a two-state solution – though he pointed to the on-going ceasefire and the unity government as positive signs. The fourth: continued insistence on the part of the Israeli government that there is no real partner for peace on the Palestinian side.

All obstacles, no doubt. Large obstacles. However, both men spoke of the movement towards negotiations – how Condoleeza Rice, Jordan’s King Abdullah, and European Union spokespeople all referred to Geneva in the previous weeks. They also spoke of the need for U.S. involvement – and that the time has come to renew efforts between Brit Tzedek and the Geneva Initiative. “Send people here,” Baltiansky suggested, “Get U.S. journalists involved. Tell our story, the story of negotiations. It would be dangerous for the U.S. to forget about Israel. This is about the future of the Jewish people.”

LET'S TALK!

AMONG JEWS • WITH OUR DECISION MAKERS •
AMONG THE PEOPLE • AMONG GOVERNMENT LEADERS
WITH UNDERSTANDING • WITH VISION • FOR A BETTER WAY

LET'S REINVIGORATE THE DIALOGUE ABOUT THE PATH TO PEACE