

# The peace process and the Palestinians: a road map to Mars

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Recently a Palestinian colleague living under military occupation had an extended discussion with a Swiss diplomat about the usefulness or otherwise of the Geneva Accord—the unofficial Palestinian–Israeli peace plan launched in December 2003, arising from negotiations hosted by the Swiss government, which is now subsidizing the huge campaign for its promotion worldwide. After several hours of careful analysis of the strategic, practical, tactical and ethical viability of this initiative, and with my colleague still unable to find a single positive indicator that it could be successfully implemented, the Swiss representative, in exasperation, began yet another attempt to explain the overarching rationale of the Geneva initiative: ‘Just imagine for a moment’, he pleaded, ‘that you are on Mars ...’

Mars indeed. We find ourselves—the Palestinians and the international community—at the threshold of a new era. The effects of this transition are rarely talked about, and thus hardly understood, yet their impact has already proved formidable. Once we possessed a broad consensus, right across the international community, on the types of mechanism that were needed to resolve the conflict in the Middle East. These mechanisms relied upon common understandings about the principles and guidelines upon which an approach should be based, and included the relevant UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions; common rules of engagement and reciprocity; regional and international involvement; and the recognition of human rights and international law. In the past three years most of these common understandings have all but disappeared. The evaporation of these former landmarks has heralded a radical shift in the practical dealings of the international community with the Palestinians: it now operates in a vacuum, no longer moored by the common understandings and principles that had guided its approach since as far back as the Treaty of Westphalia. In the absence of the universalist framework within which the Israeli–Palestinian conflict was formerly viewed and discussed, a variety of forms of particularism have now emerged.

This significant new ‘groupthink’ shared by the experts, academics, diplomats and officials who make up the Middle East policy community has emerged more or less by default, and has yet to be defined and classified as a system;

certainly it is not systematic. Yet specific (as opposed to universalist) new terminology, new approaches and new common understandings are already in place, and can be identified and discussed. This article sets out to identify and discuss these new trends. Precisely how this new approach is reflected in policy towards the Palestinians has not yet been articulated explicitly (there are several reasons for this silence, a number of which will be outlined below); but at the same time these new understandings, which may be characterized as norms, are being expressed in public and formal initiatives for peace as well as more informal, private understandings and measures. This article further aims to outline how these new understandings define the current attitude of the international community towards the Palestinians, and attempts to track and classify this new international attitude in several spheres. It will also look at the antecedents for these new understandings in the trend of the last decade of peacemaking. The conclusion of the article focuses on the Palestinian response to these recent approaches and processes now under way, as well as setting out the very different Palestinian approach to the conflict and its resolution.

### Towards a new 'groupthink'

The latest unofficial peace plan, the Geneva Accord, has been trumpeted as a timely reaction to the failings of the official 'road map for peace' launched by the Americans (with the involvement of their Quartet partners, the European Union, the Russians, and the United Nations) in 2002.<sup>1</sup> The Accord declared an innovative new approach to resolving the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. Rather than following the road map's 'performance-based' formula of incremental steps, with ambiguously expressed principles and no real enforcement or monitoring capacities (following the Oslo model), this initiative boldly sets out the endgame—that is, the final negotiated position of both parties to the conflict—in a comprehensive and indeed excessively detailed manner.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, there is not as much difference between the two plans as one might at first think. For one thing, although the Geneva Accord is being presented as an unofficial peace plan, reliant upon the garnering of popular consent, it is being heavily promoted and funded by various states in Europe (in particular Switzerland, the official backer),<sup>3</sup> certain foreign ministers (Joschka Fischer in Germany is a particularly strong proponent) and the offices of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs (but not the European Commissioner for External Relations); and it is rejected by the Palestinian mainstream. And yet it is being presented as almost a *fait accompli* to prime ministers, presidents and foreign

<sup>1</sup> 'A performance-based road map to a permanent two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict' can be found at <http://www.nad-plo.org/ciroadm2.php>.

<sup>2</sup> The Geneva Accord, as first published, can be found in *Ha'aretz*: <http://www.haaretzdaily.com>.

<sup>3</sup> An enormous amount of money has gone into advertisements both within Israel and abroad. On the Palestinian side, the only public dissemination has been one supplement in the *Al Ayyam* newspaper, which published the details and annexes of the initiative. See <http://www.al-ayyam.com/today/index.asp>.

ministries in both Europe and the Arab world. Second, just like the road map for peace, it claims to be the only real game in town, setting out the precise scope of and limits to legitimate discussion on the fundamental issues of the conflict and the manner in which they are to be addressed. Third and most important, it is just as far removed from the realities on the ground as the American road map. But both documents serve the particular purpose of providing a framework for discussions on the Palestinian concessions that are now necessary for peace. Within the vacuum in the current international arena, stripped of its former norms and rules, the combined organizing framework of the road map and the Geneva Accord has an authoritative impact on the policy and practices of the international community in dealing with the Palestinians. This has translated into a new ad hoc set of understandings.

Within a few months, the road map's central purpose as the means to enable the American and Israeli governments to pursue their militaristic agendas on the ground without any resistance became obvious to all in the international community. After the war in Iraq of spring 2003 and the Israeli invasion of Palestinian territory, followed by the total destruction of Palestinian institutional infrastructure and the near-complete reoccupation of the West Bank, the first of the new common understandings emerged as the international community's response to these events.<sup>4</sup> This response was characterized by a deep and growing pessimism as to the possibility of having any positive influence on the situation, a loss of faith in the ability to function logically, an incapacity to create an informal coalition against this regressive agenda, and a profound despair and loss of hope within both bureaucratic and elite policy-making circles concerning the very system in which they were operating.

These general feelings produced a certain informal received wisdom and rationale within the policy-making community of diplomats and experts, apparent especially in the emergence of a terminology and language that seemed better suited to the extremely fluid circumstances resulting from the Iraq war and the reoccupation of the West Bank. Certain key phrases were introduced and became commonplace. The earliest of these were along the lines of: *We must be practical*. This was to mean, above all: We must accept the new Israeli supremacy in the region. The implication was that reliance could no longer be placed upon the common system, of rules and institutions which had underpinned international relations for so long. The new tenet was advanced to explain a range of responses, such as why international law was now an impractical yardstick to apply to the occupied Palestinian territories, and in defining Israeli practices and breaches of human rights conventions. It meant that little protest, if any, could now be expected from the international community in response to the increasingly anarchic, aggressive, and expansionist policies of the Sharon government. This was most recently seen in the attempt to prevent Palestinians getting legal guidelines from the International Court of Justice on the commonly accepted

<sup>4</sup> As used here, the term 'international community' does not include the Bush administration in the United States or the Sharon government in Israel.

illegality of the construction of a separation wall on Palestinian land in occupied Palestinian territories.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, international law, or indeed any legal regime at all, is ruled out as a basis for any peace process.

The drafters of the Geneva Accord have reflected this reality by claiming the absence of a fundamental principle in law as the very enactment of it. This contradictory approach can be seen in many instances throughout the text, but it is most crudely explicit in Article 7 of the Accord, which deals with the refugee issue. The implementation of the article's clauses is described as embodying the 'implementation' of UN Resolution 194 of 1949, which sets out the internationally accepted position on the rights of Palestinian refugees, namely that those who wish to do so may return to their homes. Yet the substance of Article 7 is, in very clear terms, a refutation of this principle. The agreement stipulates that settlement of refugees in Israel will be at the sovereign discretion of Israel alone. This formula is a *de facto* annulment of the right of return, according to Israel's wish to 'preserve the Jewish character' of the State of Israel. The Israeli architect of the plan, former Labour government minister Yossi Beilin, addressed this matter on Israel Radio with the following words: 'No Palestinian will enter Israel under a "right of return" ... There will be no right of return ... Whoever thinks that through some clause or other he can say that there is a right of return—there is no right of return here ... there is no right of return in this agreement, and there will be none'.<sup>6</sup> Thus the Accord's 'implementation' of Resolution 194 is, in very real terms, its repudiation.

Another tenet frequently advanced was: *Our only possible role is to operate on the margins*. This common understanding, based on an acceptance that the road map was the 'only game in town', has in practice meant excluding from consideration any initiatives led by European figures or by the Quartet. The EU has thus largely stayed out of the political design of the peace process,<sup>7</sup> and has focused almost entirely upon humanitarian relief in the various emergency crises that rapidly arose as a result of the American and Israeli policies: within the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza once the infrastructure they had paid for had been demolished, and within the Palestinian Authority. This meant a concentration on technical aspects of the road map, which were not based on principles of the old system: detailed

<sup>5</sup> An example is the British position on the ICJ's right to rule as presented by British Foreign Minister Bill Rammell on November 16th, 2003. He declared in the House of Commons that the illegality of the wall must be addressed exclusively through bilateral negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis: 'The question could only be settled through direct negotiations between the two parties. Pursuing an advisory opinion would not help to re-launch the dialogue nor to implement the Road Map, which should be the priority.' Taking the opposing view, the Oxford Public Interest Lawyers' 56-page opinion is at the time of writing the most comprehensive international law opinion published on the legal consequences of Israel's separation barrier. The full text of the opinion and its executive summary are available online at <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~magd1538/OXPIL.htm>. See also Iain Scobbie, 'An analysis of issues concerning competence and procedure', at [www.soas.ac.uk/lawpeace/medaest](http://www.soas.ac.uk/lawpeace/medaest).

<sup>6</sup> *Ha'aretz*, 14 Oct. 2003.

<sup>7</sup> European representatives did play a positive role in strengthening the language of the road map at its inception, introducing the conception of 'goal-based' activity to strengthen the 'performance-based' methodology of the document.

work on 'reform' or 'elections' was circumscribed by the American definition of these processes, so that they were essentially neither democratic in form nor aimed at helping the Palestinians achieve liberty, rights or democracy.<sup>8</sup>

In practice this has meant that EU member states have restricted themselves in what they consider they can do. In particular, diplomats who feel themselves in constrained policy conditions have in effect given up on the idea of offering a protective or monitoring role to the Palestinian civilian population, and on the usefulness of continuing to protest at grave breaches of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories. This despair of being able to change Israeli military policy has meant a shift in concentration on to 'what we *can* do'. For the British, for example, who are severely inhibited in their foreign policy in the Middle East by their relationship with the United States, this has led to a rather grim focus on Palestinian police and security work. They have been active in arranging (always temporary) truces and *hudnas* between factions, providing prison guard facilities, and setting up lengthy backroom security negotiations on issues that are, in the end, quite peripheral to the situation. There is a further unintended consequence in this reductivist, specialist approach: namely, that the tasks undertaken themselves become a means of putting further pressure on the Palestinians, rather than relieving them from the predicament in which they are trapped. As one British diplomat remarked privately, while discussing what service they are best placed to facilitate: 'Our job is to deliver the Palestinians to the Americans.'

Another 'common understanding' that has emerged is: *We all know what the solution is*, in other words, it is whatever the current balance of power dictates. This understanding has been played out with particular force in a multitude of official or public and unofficial or secret arenas around the business of the Geneva Accord, within both the policy community and the Palestinian body politic. It is important to remind ourselves briefly of the context in which this peace initiative was launched. The Geneva Accord emerged on the back of Sharon's expansionist and extremist ideology, and in particular the actions undertaken by the Israeli Defence Force in the service of this ideology. These had created an atmosphere of genuine fear—both within the international community and among Palestinians—throughout and after the period of the military invasion, with the demolition of institutions, attacks and siege on the President's compound, that the Sharon regime was about to effect a new expulsion of the Palestinian population.<sup>9</sup> Awareness that this was a real possibility

<sup>8</sup> The reform procedures carried out by the international Task Group on reform focused extensively on fiscal transparency. The political conditions for reform laid down to the Palestinians included the creation of a prime minister, the rushing through of a constitution (without due process or participation), and the attempt to transfer security agencies into the hands of the new prime minister. These latter conditions have been characterized by the majority of Palestinians as an assault on democracy and an attempt to weaken the national consensus in negotiations with Israel.

<sup>9</sup> For the most recent authoritative report on the economic, social and political crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories, see the House of Commons International Development Committee, *Development and assistance and the occupied Palestinian territories*, 2 vols (London: HMSO, 15 Jan. 2004), which can be found at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmintdev/230/23002.htm>.

hovered in the air alongside increasing Israeli fear of the ‘demographic time bomb’ represented by the increasing Arab Palestinian population in the state of Israel. Discussion of the demographic threat was aired openly in the debates in the Knesset and Israeli press, and prominent within it was the common view (shared from left to right in Israeli society) that the nature of the Jewish state was threatened, the Israeli state itself under a state of existential siege. Binyamin Netanyahu declared at a recent Herzliya conference that the 1.3 million Israeli citizens of Palestinian origin (as distinct from the Palestinians in the occupied territories, who could simply be fenced out) represented the true ‘demographic threat’ to the Jewish state, and that if this population grew from its current 20 per cent to 35–40 per cent, Israel would become a ‘binational country’. At the same conference, Dr Yitzhak Ravid, a senior researcher at the Israeli government’s Armaments Development Authority, called for Israel to ‘implement a stringent policy of family planning in relation to its Muslim population’. In case his meaning wasn’t clear, Ravid added: ‘the delivery rooms in Soroka Hospital in Be’ersheba have turned into a factory for the production of a backward population.’

It was in this dangerous atmosphere that the Israeli left attempted to find a Palestinian partner who would agree to sign away, among other things, the refugees’ right of return—the one concession that any Palestinian representative is not legally at liberty to make in this manner, on behalf of an entire people. But this was a consistent red line with the Israelis: the right of return was not to be addressed (an important feature in the growing international consensus that *We know what the solution is*). It has been a key factor in the unravelling of every peace plan since Oslo. The central argument now advanced was that ‘time is running out’, and if some Palestinians didn’t step up to the plate, they would have only themselves to blame for what Sharon had in mind for them. It was characterized as a last chance for peace, for the two-state solution, for peace in our time. The fact that there were a few Palestinians who felt obliged, or were persuaded, to see this initiative as, indeed, the last chance for peace (or if not that, then the last chance for them), would not, under any other circumstances, have meant anything much. Quite simply, this is because there is not a single sizeable Palestinian constituency—moderate or extreme, left or right—that adheres to this position. It would have joined the Tenet plan, the Ayalon–Nusseibeh plan, and all the other plans on the large pile of other protracted but ineffective peace initiatives. It would have been seen as a waste of time at best, a sad reflection of the balance of power between occupier and occupied at worst. But in the conditions pertaining to this particular moment something else took shape, formed by the new understandings that were being forged in the normative vacuum within which the international community was now operating.

The Geneva Accord was seized upon by actors in the international community who had, over the previous two years, done little or nothing to counter either the fierce aggression of the Sharon government in the occupied territories or the American administration’s military ambitions in Iraq, and who

were desperately seeking, instead, a non-controversial tool with which to challenge the Israeli and American hegemonic discourse on peace, namely, the failed road map. Enormous diplomatic energy and huge amounts of money went into developing an international coalition for the 'launch' of the Accord in Switzerland, and tremendous pressure was put on the Palestinian leadership to accept it in full, or at least to accept the attendance of those ex-government ministers and party officials involved in its creation. A quite powerful and active international organization, the International Crisis Group (ICG), made up of former diplomats, became an active and vociferous backer.<sup>10</sup> UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, former US president Jimmy Carter, former foreign ministers from virtually every European state, and even the Hollywood actor Richard Dreyfuss arrived in Geneva to launch this theoretical peace accord as 'the only chance, the last hope, for peace'.

What then resulted was a classic example of 'groupthink', the theory of which can be particularly useful in explaining how a set of people can become inflexibly committed to a project like the Geneva Accord.<sup>11</sup> In her work on the IMF, Ngaire Woods has explained the symptoms of the phenomenon thus:

Groupthink can be empirically observed through various symptoms. These can be summarized under three headings: overestimation of the group; closed-mindedness; and pressures towards uniformity. Overestimation of the group arises where a group has a strong belief in the correctness of its cause (belief in its inherent morality) and as a group becomes overoptimistic (illusion of invulnerability). Closed-mindedness occurs as a group indulges in collective rationalization of its position, and the stereotyping of 'out-groups'. Pressures towards uniformity are exerted through pressure on dissenters to conform, as well as through self-censorship. The group thus becomes increasingly entrenched by an illusion of unanimity, which pertains as it becomes more prone to screening out warnings and counter-information that might lead to a reconsideration of decisions.<sup>12</sup>

Within weeks of the launch, various European governments began informally letting Palestinian humanitarian and human rights agencies know that if they continued to criticize the Geneva plan their funding would be cut. Foreign ministries across Europe, after hosting the architects of the Accord in policy and government meetings, expressed reservations about seeing Palestinians who

<sup>10</sup> The ICG had already set out its 'endgame' solution for peace in the Middle East in several publications: *Middle East endgame I: getting to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement*, Middle East Report no. 2, 16 July 2002; *Middle East endgame II: how a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement would look*, Middle East Report no. 3, 16 July 2002; *Middle East endgame III: Israel, Syria and Lebanon—how comprehensive peace settlements would look*, Middle East Report no. 4, 16 July 2002; *A time to lead: the international community and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*, Middle East Report no. 1, 10 April 2002: all available at <http://www.crisisweb.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> See I. Janis, *Victims of groupthink: a psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972); Marlene E. Turner, Anthony R. Pratkanis, Preston Probasco et al., 'Threat, cohesion, and group effectiveness: testing a social identity maintenance perspective on groupthink', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 63: 5, Nov. 1992, pp. 781–96.

<sup>12</sup> Ngaire Woods, 'Groupthink, the IMF, the World Bank and decision making about the 1994 Mexican crisis', in Bob Reinalda and Bertjan Verbeek, eds, *Decision-making in international organizations* (London: Routledge, 2003).

were not coming to 'support and develop' the Geneva initiative, wanting only to know how their approach to refugees, international humanitarian law or peace processes 'complemented' the work of the plan. Palestinians critical of the obvious flaws within it were not invited to meetings that had been set up to promote it in the capitals of Europe, and international agencies that were promoting the Accord became heavy-handed in their unsubstantiated claims that the Accord was widely accepted in the region.

How did the international consensus concerning the peace process arrive to this advanced condition of groupthink, in which the accepted wisdom is so radically—and dangerously—divorced from the obvious realities? The most important factor to recognize is that, beyond the recent dramatic change in the geopolitical arena, there has been a marked change in the discourse about the Middle East. Although there is a sudden absence of the traditional rules, institutions, and common values previously relied upon, we have not been operating in a vacuum, but in a world that has been stood on its head. Those working on the Middle East in the West may not have been active in setting out this new agenda, but they have been profoundly shaped by it, and by the new language in which the American neo-conservative agenda has been expressed across the world. Almost overnight Arafat has been transformed from the supreme architect of Oslo into the arch-terrorist; the Palestinians are no longer a people suffering military occupation or deserving rights and protections, but instead are entirely responsible for their predicament; the conflict is now defined as an ethnic and religious war with no origin or political cause that can be rectified, defined rather by a pre-emptive search for security against endless terrorism; Sharon is described by the US President as a man of peace; any serious criticism of Israel—or support of the Palestinians—brings on massive, organized political attacks, smears of anti-Semitism, and threats and bullying from neo-conservative and conservative lobbyists. The viciousness of these attacks has, quite frankly, terrified everyone. Parliamentary select committees, EU institutions, foreign ministries, national newspapers, television journalists and producers, academics and think-tanks: all have been subjected to wave after wave of intimidating lobbying from the neo-conservatives and far-right Israeli supporters, which has had a profound effect in shaping the overall framework within which diplomats and policy experts operate.

Yet although it is clear that the past two years have been pivotal in legitimizing this new approach, it draws on ideas that go much further back. Indeed, this means of addressing the refugee issue (namely, by ignoring it rather than resolving it) had been quietly established in the previous decade of collective endeavour, and is responsible for the situation in which we now find ourselves. It emerged in large part from the work of only a handful of key academics, policy experts and think-tank projects. It is important here to set out briefly how the Oslo approach to the refugee issue evolved over the previous ten years, and the impact it has had on this new set of circumstances.



## **From Oslo to Geneva**

The Oslo framework, established in 1993, was presented as *the* realistic solution to the refugee problem, and those who sought to disagree—or, even worse, to rectify or change it, or to address its flaws—were seen as dangerous and foolhardy; they were jeopardizing ‘the deal’ (*We all know what the solution is*). But in fact, a peace process that was marketed as pragmatic, highly technical and bound by the constraints of a scientific framework was actually riddled with dangerous illusions, wild utopianism and false universalism. It was also heavily reliant on faulty social science models that, although emerging from academia, were neither methodologically rigorous nor empirically tested.<sup>13</sup>

A central element of the Oslo arrangements was the decision simply to shelve the hard issues (including the core of the conflict: the refugee question) to a later date, known as ‘final status’. This relied upon a methodology drawn from conflict resolution literature which promoted confidence-building measures, to be introduced in incremental steps. Yet, as has now become obvious, incrementalism has not meant incremental improvement on either the contours or the substance of the refugee problem, but rather incremental disrepair, neglect, and a growing intransigence on the part of those involved. Above all, there has been a growing ignorance of this issue, especially within the wider policy community of the Middle East peace process. The Oslo process sought quietly to undermine the international legal standards that have underpinned the Palestinian refugee case, and to lower the refugees’ expectations in their quest for them. Instead, it has done the opposite, and the refugees have mobilized, both in human rights groups and within the mainstream political parties. Meanwhile, it raised the expectations of the Israelis to an impossible threshold, so that even centre and left-wing Israeli commentators and politicians were sincerely shocked when the refugee issue returned to the table as a matter that needed to be substantively addressed: they had been led to believe, falsely, that it was a closed file, and that the refugees would disappear off the map when they disappeared off the negotiating table. Barak’s reaction at Camp David can best be understood in the light of this common understanding, fostered by the Oslo process.

A vast wave of policy-oriented academic research was undertaken after 1993, guided by an unspoken understanding that a final settlement would comprehensively ignore refugee rights.<sup>14</sup> It focused instead upon developing mechanisms that would impose this settlement through a system combining compensation, absorption of existing refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza into local neighbourhoods and of the refugees into host and third-party countries, and the

<sup>13</sup> Since 2000 an extensive literature has emerged analysing the major shortcomings of the Oslo process. See e.g. Edward Said, *The end of the peace process* (London: Granta, 2001); Naseer Aruri, *Dishonest broker: the US role in Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2003); Mouin Rabbani, ‘The Mitchell Report: Oslo’s last gasp’, *Middle East Report*, June 2001.

<sup>14</sup> See the most recent major collection of academic and policy research on Palestinian refugees and the conflict organized by the International Development Research Council’s meeting ‘Stocktaking on Palestinian Refugee Research’, Ottawa, June 2003, at [http://network.idrc.ca/en/ev-32583-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://network.idrc.ca/en/ev-32583-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html).

resettlement of some into the West Bank. This was to be done by mutual arrangement between Arab host nations and those members of the international community involved in the peace process. They were to present it to an unresisting refugee population inside and outside the West Bank and Gaza as a legitimate agreement, negotiated by the Palestinian National Authority, acting in the name of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PNA), whose presence and signature would guarantee its legitimacy. Under this policy the PNA became the primary client of the international donor community, and the exclusive focus of both attention and extreme pressure. The refugees as a group were assessed, surveyed, quantified, classified and tested, and their living standards, housing conditions, and economic and social interests became the objects of study. The refugees themselves, as a people, were nowhere to be found.<sup>15</sup>

The Geneva Accord was the logical next step in this formulation. Governments that were involved in the multilateral negotiations on refugees set up under the Oslo Accord (negotiations which rapidly became frozen in any meaningful sense through the refusal of Israel to take part) began working instead with Arab governments and a handful of international experts to apply pressure on the Palestinian position. Foreign governments hired officials to coordinate positions between the Palestinian ministries. This task was seen as shepherding the PNA to take a position against the national consensus on refugees, and tailor their negotiating position to adhere to this position (*We all know what the solution is*). The PNA began to speak in two distinct voices: one to the international donor community, upon whose support it relied for its existence; and the other to its people, whom it ostensibly represented.

The reaction of the Palestinian body politic to the Geneva Accord was somewhat slow in coming, partly because of the crisis that was gripping the West Bank and Gaza, but also as a result of the almost total secrecy that surrounded this plan and its origins. Just a few Palestinian ‘experts’, along with the beleaguered ministry for refugee affairs and the foreign ministry of the PNA, who were the target of it, and the international policy group of donors concerned with the refugee issue were privy to its strategy and substance. Only once the Geneva Accord had been unveiled to dramatic headlines across Europe in December 2003 did it become a publicly stated policy—if not of the PNA itself, then of certain (less popular) elements within it.<sup>16</sup> Beginning immediately after its publication and growing in the weeks following its launch, the wave of Palestinian political and popular rejection of the plan is well known, and has become comprehensive and unqualified. Unions, the mainstream parties, local

<sup>15</sup> For the most comprehensive database on refugee research, see the Palestinian Refugee Research Network, under the auspices of McGill University, at <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/mepp/prrn/prfront.html>.

<sup>16</sup> The same reaction greeted the Nusseibeh–Ayalon Plan some months previously. This plan required Palestinian refugees to abandon their rights, in particular their right of return, in advance. Nusseibeh’s role as the PNA’s representative for Jerusalem elicited condemnation of this position from across the political spectrum. For English translations of many of the petitions and positions of the political parties, popular committees and unions, see [www.badil.org](http://www.badil.org).

and national political associations, human rights activists, humanitarian NGOs, the representatives of the popular committees of the camps, the refugee camps in exile, respected secular leaders: all have written detailed rejections of the Geneva Accord, primarily for its position on refugees, but also for the way in which it was negotiated by individuals, and the manner in which it was presented and launched.

### **Where now?**

Is there any chance for peace in the near future if the international community's experts on the Middle East are no longer aware of what a reasonable deal is? Impoverished in capacity, unable either to promote a pragmatic peace process or in practice to defend the fading possibilities for a viable state on the West Bank and Gaza, we—the Palestinians and the international community—are all now at a crucial turning point. The encouraging news is that, with very little effort, the international community could get itself on track again. Back on earth, just below the surface of international diplomacy, think-tank round table meetings and urgent donors attempt to respond to the current crises and ameliorate the excesses of the Israeli military occupation, there is a huge wave of activity within Palestinian political society, both inside and outside the occupied Palestinian territories. In most of these intellectual and practical activities, concrete programmes are being formed for conflict resolution around the refugee issue, involving truth and reconciliation processes; education; the involvement of civil society on both sides; the creation of civic participatory structures for refugees to engage actively in the peace process via democratic routes; workshops running in refugee camps and with small charities that promote path-breaking but pragmatic initiatives. All these could easily be mirrored and promoted at the level of state actors, and some are being encouraged by the EU's Commission for External Relations. Even if the international community has momentarily lost its way—and, worse, lost hope for a sane and negotiated durable settlement to the conflict—the Palestinians most certainly have not. These new, innovative, creative ideas and approaches are slowly percolating their way through the formal structures where organized and committed work on a serious peace process has all but ceased. It would not take much effort to learn about these approaches, or even to produce some useful research into them: something experts and academics are happily both well trained and well placed to do.