

A Welcome Flurry of Activity

The distribution of copies of the Geneva Accord to every household in Israel began this week. This document, the result of long discussions between teams headed by Yossi Beilin on the Israeli side and Yasser Abed Rabbo on the Palestinian side, presents a model for a permanent status agreement between the two peoples, based on two states.

The Palestinian state will be "non-militarized" and include nearly all of the territory of the West Bank and Gaza, except for areas close to the Green Line that are densely populated with Israeli settlements. These areas will be annexed to Israel in exchange for the transfer of Israeli territory along the border with the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian state. Initial surveys conducted in Israel after the publication of the Geneva Accord - before the public had a chance to study the document's details - indicated an impressive level of support.

At the same time, the Peoples' Voice campaign is moving forward. This campaign is the initiative of Ami Ayalon, the former head of the Shin Bet, and Sari Nusseibeh, the president of Al-Quds University. The fact that some 150,000 Israelis and Palestinians have already signed on to this campaign indicates that it, too, has elicited a substantial response. This initiative, like the Geneva Accord, is also based on a two-state solution.

On Friday, Ayalon received the public support of three of his colleagues who had also served as head of the Shin Bet. The three former Shin Bet directors signed the "National Census" formulated by Ayalon and Nusseibeh and participated with Ayalon in a joint newspaper interview published in Yedioth Ahronoth. The joint interview was a rare event in itself, and it also included unusually harsh criticism.

The four men, who directed the Shin Bet from 1980 to 2000, warned that the State of Israel is heading toward a catastrophe if it does not fundamentally change its policy toward the Palestinian people. They voiced support for an extensive withdrawal and establishment of a Palestinian state, while challenging the premise that military occupation can ultimately lead to a denouement that will serve Israel's long-term interests.

Doubts about the basic assumptions of the current policy also surfaced two weeks ago in a conversation between Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon and three journalists. This conversation drew angry responses from the prime minister and defense minister.

Behind this flurry of new and welcome thinking stands the threatening demographic reality, which can no longer be ignored. It's not only that time is not working to our benefit; time is running out. In a few years, the Palestinian population between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea will grow to equal that of the Jewish population. Without some movement toward an accord, there will be increasing support among Palestinians and within the international community for establishing a binational state,

whose character will be determined by the Palestinian majority.

The reality is clear and the hopelessness of the government's policies is also clear. The peace initiatives and various plans, and the support they are gathering, reflect the widening cracks in the public's faith in the government's positions. However, the political constellation necessary for translating these positive developments into real political momentum has yet to coalesce.