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## An Uphill Road for Bold Mideast Peace Plans

Grass-Roots Campaign and Leaders' Initiative Both Tackle Toughest Issues Head-On

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RANTIS, West Bank -- Palestinians Fahed Abu Elhaj and Saleh Balut walked down the street of this besieged town and cajoled residents to sign a petition calling on Palestinian and Israeli leaders to make peace. It was a hard sell.

"I'll sign, and what will happen in the meantime?" said Nasir Zaydan, 65. "They'll take more land and build more settlements."

On trendy, secular Shenkin Street in central Tel Aviv, Israeli signature collectors Judy Duaniss and Ofry Levy confronted similar problems with their countrymen.

"All the territories are ours!" diamond merchant Yossie Kube, 32, yelled at them. "The greater land of Israel!"

"I have sympathy for the Palestinian people," said Rona Hirschon, 60, an English teacher who refused to sign. "All they have to do is stop the terror."

For the People's Voice campaign, the past five months have been a long, hard slog. But despite the hardened attitudes on both sides, 113,000 Israelis and 65,000 Palestinians have signed petitions demanding that Jewish settlers get out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, that Palestinians give up their claim to the right to return to Israel and that the decades of hostilities between the two peoples be ended with the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

The unprecedented grass-roots campaign is running in parallel with another initiative -- the Geneva Accord, an unofficial, 9,930-word plan negotiated by current and former Israeli and Palestinian leaders -- to revive Israel's long-dormant peace camp.

The two initiatives have generated much debate for their willingness to tackle topics that are often ignored because they are divisive: Jewish settlements; the Palestinians' claim to a right of return to areas in Israel that they left in 1948; and the status of Jerusalem, which both peoples claim as their capital.

Many peace plans -- including the U.S.-backed "road map," which is now stalled -- have deferred negotiations on tough topics. But the Geneva Accord and the People's Voice campaign stress that those issues must be addressed upfront so both sides know what they would get for ending the conflict, in which more than 900 Israelis and 2,500 Palestinians have been killed since the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation began in September 2000.

Noting that under current demographic trends, Palestinians could soon outnumber Israelis, retired Maj. Gen. Ami Ayalon, the Israeli head of the People's Voice campaign, said, "We are trying to activate the

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Israeli audience to influence our administration to change the direction we are moving in now, because we understand that the status quo is leading us to a place that a majority of Israelis don't want to be, which is one political entity from Jordan to the sea, which is not a state for Jewish people, and this would be the end of Zionism."

Ayalon, a former head of Israel's Shin Bet security agency, initiated the petition drive with Sari Nusseibeh, president of Al-Quds University and a leading Palestinian advocate of negotiations.

The two peace plans, which were drafted independently, lay out what many analysts and moderates see as the inevitable solution if a Palestinian state and Israel are to live side by side in peace: Israel gives up most of its Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, except for a few large, well-established ones, for which Palestinians would be compensated with a land swap; the Palestinians give up their demand to return to lands they owned in Israel, with some type of compensation; and the two countries would share Jerusalem as their capitals.

The framers of the plans said they hope they will eventually be the basis for a comprehensive, final peace accord. Neither government has accepted either plan.

The two initiatives have created a stir that is putting intense pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to demonstrate a greater willingness to compromise. He has recently talked of unilateral concessions that could include the evacuation of some settlements, according to Israeli news reports.

The peace push is also being helped by renewed U.S. pressure on Israel to moderate its policies toward Palestinians, outspoken criticism of Sharon's policies by current and former high-ranking Israeli security officials, and rising impatience among people on both sides with leaders who, after three years of bloodshed, have made no headway toward resolving the conflict.

"These agreements are flourishing because people, I think, are sick of [the situation]; they're ready for a change," Elisheva Leibler, 32, an American who moved to Israel two years ago, said while tending to her two children at a Jerusalem mall. "Too much blood has been shed, and there is a sense that we're stuck in a quagmire."

"For the first time in Palestinian history, an initiative is coming up from the street instead of being imposed on the people from above," said Abu Elhaj, one of the top coordinators for the People's Voice in the West Bank. "We want to convince people to be involved in determining their future."

Yossi Beilin, the senior Israeli negotiator on the Geneva Accord and an architect of the 1993 Oslo peace agreements, said that immediate, scathing attacks against him and his new plan by Sharon's government and its allies provided unexpected publicity and legitimacy.

"They became our best PR people," he said. The publicity bonanza continued last week when Israel's High Court ordered the Israel Broadcasting Authority to lift a ban on airing commercials on state radio about the People's Voice petition drive and the Geneva Accord, so named because of the Swiss government's active promotion of the negotiations.

On the Palestinian side, radical groups including Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, staged a rally in Gaza City last week that drew thousands of protesters to denounce the Palestinian negotiators of the Geneva Accord as traitors for giving up the right of return.

In a documentary aired last week on Israeli television, the top Palestinian negotiator on the Geneva



Accord, former cabinet minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, was asked if he was not betraying a Palestinian dream.

"I am not, as a leader and as a politician, responsible for dreams," he replied. "I am responsible that the dreams shall not become nightmares."

Here in Rantis, about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem, workers for the People's Voice campaign said they are engaged in more than simply gathering signatures. They said they see their mission as educating and lobbying the public to change its ways, which often means spending hours in debate to gather a few signatures.

A suicide bomber who killed nine Israeli soldiers at a bus stop outside Tel Aviv 10 weeks ago hailed from this town of 3,100 Palestinians. After the Palestinian uprising began about three years ago, most Rantis residents who worked in Israel lost their jobs. The main entrance to town was barricaded by the Israeli army, and the only way in and out is by a dirt road.

Unemployment is at about 70 percent, town officials say. There is no telephone service. More than half the homes have no running water. And last week, Israeli bulldozers and dump trucks arrived to begin work on the barrier system that Israel is building around the West Bank. People here said it will carve off much of their agricultural land.

"We spend two or three hours arguing with someone that there's a possibility for peace, and the same person has to go to the doctor and tries to leave the village and is stopped by the Israeli military and changes his mind, and we have to start all over," said Balut, the top People's Voice official in Rantis. "Getting them to sign is only the beginning of convincing them in the direction of peace."

*Special correspondents Samuel Sockol and Hillary Claussen contributed to this report.*

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