

# World Goodwill Interview with Daniel Levy for the Cycle of Conferences Project on “The Geneva Accord”.

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Interviewer: Lesley Vann

**Daniel Levy was the lead Israeli drafter of the Geneva Accord and led the working-level Israeli negotiating team for over two years. He is the Director of the Prospects for Peace Initiative and a senior fellow at the Century Foundation and the New America Foundation.**

WG: Welcome Daniel Levy and many thanks for making time to speak with us. As Director of the Prospects for Peace Initiative and a senior fellow at the Century Foundation and the New America Foundation, it's obvious that you are really an 'ideas' person. As such you will be well aware of the ingrained and crystallised thought patterns that obstruct new forms of thinking. So what is your current general perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian situation in terms of the changing attitudes, adaptability, and – let's say – the spirit of compromise amongst the main players. Are you hopeful about things?

DL: I would say that the sources of optimism and hope, such as they are, are the following. The first would be that despite everything – and in some ways because of everything, because there's an element of conflict fatigue – there is a quite stable majority of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians who recognise the contours of the solution and are willing to accept them. They distrust the other side. They do not necessarily believe that the other side comes into this with goodwill and good faith. But when they are presented with a package deal that addresses all the issues – in other words a permanent status solution – you consistently get majority support among Israelis and Palestinians. That's the first thing.

The second thing is that you have today – which one hasn't had in the past – a willingness on the part of the surrounding Arab States that are not directly neighbouring Israel to turn round and say: Look Israel, if you comprehensively resolve your land issues with your neighbours, then we will provide the backstop guarantee. In other words, this isn't just going to be bilateral. There is a broader Arab willingness to establish normal relations. This was stated in 2002 in the then Saudi Arab League Initiative. It was reiterated this year (2007) in March in Riyadh at the Arab League Summit. Not only do you have the Arab States, but you also have the broader Muslim world who have embraced this and turned around and said, whether it be Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, all countries that don't have formal relations with Israel, that they will also sign up to a comprehensive peace, a comprehensive normal relations between Israel and the Muslim and Arab world.

The other reason for optimism actually comes from a place which is far from positive, namely that enough of the actors now see a shared interest in resolving the Arab-Israeli and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict because of its centrality as a recruiting tool for extremists in the region and well beyond the region. Another thing that presents an opening (and it's part and parcel of the same thing) is the quagmire that the US finds itself in in Iraq. Probably the most significant articulation of this point is the Iraq Study Group Report. This report is in three sections, and one of those three sections is what they call the external envelope, and it calls for a new diplomatic offensive, and the core of that new diplomatic offensive should be re-engagement by the US in solving the Arab-Israeli conflict comprehensively. So it calls for negotiations with Syria on Golan. It calls for negotiations with the Palestinians on a permanent status solution. And it explains that if you want

to re-establish dramatically damaged US credibility in the region, that if you want to re-establish your ability to build and lead alliances and have your allies actually wanting to be identified with you and with shared goals in the region, then you need to reassert yourself in a peace-making effort between Israel and its neighbours. The reason that the Arab League, the Muslim States, have a willingness to come on board is because they see just how much the present situation feeds the hard-liners, who are as much if not more of a threat to those regimes, to those societies than they are to our own. And the rallying cry so often for the Al Qaedaists and the Salafist Jihadists is the Palestinian issue. So this kind of coincidence of interest does give us cause to think that “this is the time”.

Opposite that, you have weak leaderships on the Israeli and Palestinian sides. You still have a US administration that has not fully embraced this approach and that is still under the influence of the closed dogma, which has led to the radical destabilisation of the Middle East. This has not yet been sufficiently vanquished inside the administration to give us a really alternative approach, even though the US Secretary of State has something under way, but it’s still not clear that that is really holding sway within the administration. Plus there’s a sense in Israel that... I call it, having got to “yes” there’s a reluctance to recognise it. I mean, for me, the Saudi initiative, and the Arab League reiteration in Riyadh, shows that the region is ready to recognise Israel. This has been the struggle since Israel’s establishment, but there’s almost a reluctance on the part of Israel to accept this. Part of that is ideological, driven by the people who believe that you can never have peace with the Arabs, or who believe that the territory is divinely given and cannot be ceded. But for the majority of people – I would almost take it to the level of a very human emotion. You know, sometimes when you win an argument, you’ve got so into the groove of arguing that even when the other side concedes and says “OK, you know what, you’re right”, you don’t accept that, you want to keep arguing. I think that applies in some ways.

And on the Palestinian side it’s a question of whether one can hold together a very fragile arrangement, namely the Unity Government. Without the Unity Government it would seem to be the case that things will further spiral into civil chaos, which will make it very difficult to get an agreement with the Palestinians. And here I think that the international community led by the Americans have played a very unhelpful role in not accepting the legitimate decision of the Palestinians to vote Hamas, and not trying to see whether Hamas in government is a force that one can reach an accommodation with. Certainly when Hamas has stated their willingness to allow Mahmoud Abbas, the President, who everyone accepts is a partner, to lead negotiations. So rather than working with that formula there has been a consistent effort, and unfortunately some inside Fatah have taken a role in this, to try and force Hamas out of government unconstitutionally. That’s one of the major threats right now to an ability to build a stable outcome in the region.

WG Do you think that Abbas and Ehud Olmert have enough influence? Can they negotiate and get enough support, and if they can, then what will be the prospects for the Geneva Accord with the political leadership underway?

DL They will need to do it with significant external assistance. The key will be in accepting the Palestinian Unity Government. In other words, on the Palestinian side, if Abbas negotiates in the context of a functioning cohabitation, then I think: Yes, absolutely. He has the strength to do this, but not if most of us are still playing the game of manoeuvring these negotiations as a way of kicking Hamas out of government. On the Israeli side, Olmert still has a parliamentary majority – and there is a parliamentary majority in Israel today. It’s not exactly the same as the governing coalition, but there is a parliamentary majority for a significant territorial move and perhaps even for the kind of settlement that will be necessary. It may be that Olmert’s leadership is rather weak to achieve this, which is a problem because we have been there before. However, I think first of all if you move forward with the peace process then the chances are that what would replace Olmert

would be less rejectionist if we are in the midst of a peace process. Secondly I don't rule out Olmert being able to deliver, especially if he is working closely with the Americans and there is an American decision to go for this.

WG Which there could be at any time – I mean it's certainly within the realm of possibility.

DL It's one of the serious missing ingredients. You have an apparent willingness by the Secretary of State to move forward, but there is far from a defined strategy, and it still suffers from too many shortcomings, including the policy regarding Hamas.

WG Surely. But let's say that an unexpected situation were to occur. For example, if we think of unexpected developments in the past like the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, or the shift from apartheid in South Africa, and the laying down of arms by the IRA in Northern Ireland with the consequent move to shared government there. If something unexpected were to happen, do you think that that could help to bring the Accord more fully into the front ground?

DL Obviously it depends which unexpected development happens. Unlike the Irish situation, and in many ways perhaps unlike the South African situation, when the first developments started coming through, we know what a two state solution will look like, and so it really is a question of political will.

WG Yes, of course.

DL A question of generating the political will locally, but it's also a question of whether America wants to be a midwife to resolving the Israel-Palestinian conflict, or whether America – I would argue in direct contradiction to its own national interests – wants to continue to foment conflict in that part of the world.

WG And do you see fomenting it as being driven by a single state solution agenda?

DL O God no. At the moment it's driven by the blinkeredness of the hawkish transformationist neocon wing. And it's had a very damaging effect on Israel's security; it's been debilitating for moderates in the Middle East. So far they have set us back many many years in terms of destabilising the region, not dissimilar to what happened in Central America when they had their hands on that, in the 80s. All this has been very bad for Israel, though some claim it's been partly done in the name of Israel.

WG But since the Geneva Accord envisages the two state solution which so many of us have been studying and focusing on in the past, do you think there are circumstances in which a single state solution ever would work?

DL Well, what's the Irish analogy? What's the story in Ireland? On the one hand the peace process in Northern Ireland is about agreeing to disagree, and agreeing on the rules of the game for getting on with life in the meantime. It's not like the loyalist community has given up being part of the Union. It's not like the nationalist Republican community has given up the goal of a united independent Ireland. They haven't resolved the conflict. What they've been effective in doing is agreeing on the rules of the game.

In that respect there is no analogy because we can't have rules of the game. Rules of the game is what we failed to do in the last 15 years of the peace process. In other words, we can't agree to disagree on the outcome, because the occupation and the violence are insurmountable, absent agreeing on the endgame. So we have to take a totally different approach to Ireland. We have to agree on where a destination is. However, there are lessons we can learn from Ireland including how you bring militants into a process, including that disarmament doesn't happen overnight, including that disarmament is a gradual thing that only happens when you have a credible peace process that is delivering for both parties. And we can certainly learn from the ability of former

absolute adversaries like the Revd Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness to become Minister and First Minister.

But this won't be about a 'one state' thing. Anyone who thinks that the alternative to a two state Geneva style solution is a one state solution has got to take into account that the realisation of a one state option is decades and perhaps generations away. It is condemning Israelis and Palestinians to conflict in the meantime. That conflict will be ugly and we will continue to have rounds and rounds of bloodletting. There's no appetite either amongst most Palestinians, or amongst almost any Israelis for a one state solution.

Hence the urgency, because it gets more difficult; hence the urgency to try and make progress on a two state solution. And it gets more difficult because of the reality on the ground as settlements become evermore pervasive, making it more difficult to solve the situation. But it also becomes more difficult because more and more people lose hope. Hope is a security currency, and hope is a political currency. And if you have a population that's lost hope, then it makes it much more difficult to succeed.

WG That's true. Since you really structured the Geneva Accord and you were so much behind it as an architect, do you feel it's still the one that's most likely to be successful? Or do feel things have moved on and that there are other strategies that you might adopt to supersede that?

DL Not really. There's no kind of author's pride in it. It's more that there's not that much room left for doubt, if you're going to have a two state solution that could be sustainable. So the Taba negotiations began to get there, and the Clinton parameters took us well on our way. Geneva is a more detailed articulation of those things. Sure it won't look like Geneva; it won't be a carbon copy of Geneva. But if we're going to have an agreement, if it's not going to be imposed, but rather the product of negotiations, and if it's going to deliver dignity to both sides and maximise our chances of it being sustainable, then it ain't going to look too different from Geneva.

WG Right. So your vision is pretty much the same. It hasn't changed too much since the inception of the Accord.

DL Maybe there are small things that one needs to update in the security. Maybe there are nuances on refugees that need to be updated. I don't think in the territorial component much can be changed. But, like I say, we know more or less what it's going to look like. It's really a question of political will.

WG And certainly if the US could become a key player, it could help move everything forward, as you've said. If you had to choose, let's say, the single factor that could help move the Geneva Accord forward, what would that be in your estimation?

DL A good question. I would put it in painfully simple terms: an American decision to act in its own national interest when it comes to its approach to the Arab-Israeli, particularly Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It really would be that blunt and that simple. If there were an accurate understanding of how important this is for America in the region, for America's own national security, then I think there would be a move towards resolving this conflict. I'm not saying that Israelis and Palestinians have no responsibility, but if you had America playing the role, the lead role, then I should think it would be the most significant move towards resolving this conflict. America in the last six or seven years has flitted between being a conflict manager and conflict promoter, or indifferent. But at no stage has there been a conflict resolution effort. So it really is a damning indictment to this administration, the way it's behaved on this issue. I'd like to believe that there are changes afoot, and there might be.

- WG Yes, there might be. As you pointed out earlier, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has been somewhat supportive, and she's taken notice of the Geneva Accord. She holds it in a favourable light, except for the question of repatriation....
- DL Well there is no repatriation. We certainly don't use that word.
- WG But at the recent Riyadh summit was that question not something that was dealt with?
- DL No. But it wasn't the intention to deal with it. The intention at the Riyadh Summit was for the Arab States to reiterate the fact that if Israel reaches a comprehensive peace with its immediate neighbours, then that will also trigger normal relations, a recognition and secure borders, and way beyond that. I mean, not just secure borders. It would give Israel acceptance in the entire region by the entire Arab world. What the Arab League explicitly has said is that it is not for the Arab League to negotiate the finer details. That has to happen between Israelis and Palestinians. But what you haven't seen is any American effort to move this forward. You have not seen what you saw under the Clinton administration, which was to bring the parties together, which was to suggest American ideas. Now, it's not that the Clinton administration handled this perfectly, but at least there was an effort there, which has been very conspicuously missing.
- WG Do you think that the establishment of a Palestinian State could help to redeem the way that America's Middle East policy is viewed in some parts of the world? How constructive would it be?
- DL It would be more... Nothing would have more of an effect. Nothing would overnight change things so dramatically. It's not about the establishment of a Palestinian State, though. It's about an agreed resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And the two aren't necessarily the same, because a Palestinian State has just become a kind of catch phrase – all things to all people. What's important here is that there is an agreed permanent status, negotiation and agreement. A negotiated permanent status agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, and it can be American encouraged in very very significant ways. The funny thing is one of the few places, conflict places in the world today where President Bush can still have a positive impact, is regarding Israel and its neighbours. You know, there was a breakthrough in Ireland earlier this month (May 2007). No one would have dreamed of saying, Ah, to make this more dramatic and to get the public's more in support, let's have President Bush come. Who wants him? He's so tarnished. And that applies almost everywhere. The one place where you could deploy the President effectively as a peacemaker, he's decided not to get involved in. He has not stepped foot in any of the frontline states. He's never visited Israel as President. He's never visited the Palestinian territories, never visited Lebanon or Syria. He has never stepped foot in any of the frontline states in this conflict as President.
- WG And so some sort of breakthrough there would be monumental?
- DL Well if they had a plan and if they had the competence to see through a plan, and if it was the right plan, then it would be great. There are very serious question marks about the carrying capacity and the competence of this administration. And that's even after you get past the first problem of the ideological bent. Now, I agree, all those things are theoretically at least surmountable. And it is the person of Secretary Rice who would be the only person I think who one would imagine could take the lead in doing that. But we're still not there.
- WG How much effect do you feel public opinion can have in shaping that?
- DL Not that much.
- WG No?

- DL I mean theoretically, yes. But in reality I think a majority of the foreign policy establishment understand what the Iraq Study Group understood – and that was the bipartisan commission of ten of the great and the good, and they couldn't have been more explicit in what they said. They placed front and centre the need to secure a deal between Israel and its neighbours. It's not like Iraq would be peaceful the next day. But it would totally change the environment in which America would be operating in the region. They understood that. I think most serious political people understand it. And it's a combination of extremists such as the Christian evangelical right, such as some in the so-called pro-Israel community; it's a combination of narrow-minded ideologues such as the neocons, who have been proven to have totally not understood the region, and a combination of political cowardice.
- WG Theoretically, as you say, public opinion could sway that, but it would really be an uphill battle, because it's battling the whole establishment there.
- DL Absolutely. I think that one of the things that would be nice would be to see the so-called anti-war movement also have a positive call, not just to oppose the military surge for those who are opposed to the military surge in Iraq, but also to call for a diplomatic surge throughout the region. And to call to the active American peace promoting diplomacy, and to try and create a constituency for this built on that basis, built on the democratic foreign policy community plus internationalist realists from both the republican and democrat side and peace loving people within the Jewish community, the Arab American community, the church groups who support peace and average Americans. So I think there is a constituency out there, but it's not the main demand for enough people in America, despite the fact that many of us think that it would have a dramatic effect on American national security appertaining to the Middle East and to the genuine struggle against the jihadist threat. But people feel more comfortable just living in a world of Islamofascists not distinguishing between one Muslim group and another, and not distinguishing between cause and effect.
- WG Do you think we will see perhaps at least some sort of surge toward the interest in diplomatic solution with the Presidential campaign coming up?
- DL No. I doubt this will feature significantly in the Presidential campaign, because of reasons of domestic politics. But hopefully there will be a change in policy, if the policy has not changed before, then at least after the Presidential election in '08. What kind of a state the Middle East will be in by then is worrying for all of us. But that's a hope. We can't write-off the next 20 months, and hopefully that won't be the case. But if nothing else, then one would hope at least that the next administration will act in ways that make America, Israel and the region more, not less, secure.
- WG What are your thoughts about the recent furore caused, at least in America, by Jimmy Carter's book, *Palestine: Peace not Apartheid*? Do you think that the charge that he blames Israel too much, or that he appears anti-Semitic is fair? And do you think that apartheid is a correct appraisal of what is going on?
- DL Well, you don't have to call it apartheid. What he refers to is that that's the choice that Israel faces. If you're not going to make peace, then you are going to face the situation whereby you have to pursue an apartheid policy and/or we give the Palestinians full rights in which case it's a bi-national state, which very very few Israelis want, it's antithetical to Zionism. And we can't keep ignoring that question. So Carter's book, I thought, was a corrective that is not often heard to what is narrative within America. It's a view many many people around the world adhere to, indicating its importance, but an American audience would hit it. It's not a view that I subscribe to in its entirety. President Carter's description of the situation I find partially in tune with my own. There are parts of the Jewish Zionist narrative that aren't in that book, but that speak to me. He's saying there's a story I want to tell you that you are not familiar with. And he gives that story. When it

comes to the prescriptive part of the Carter book, where he suggests what the solutions are, there his suggestions are in line with official American policy and not too far from stated Israeli policy, even though that policy is not enacted, and absolutely in line with where the centre of global public opinion and official policy is. He's not saying anything dramatic there. He's saying what needs to be said. To describe any of that as anti-Semitic is an insult to the genuine threat of anti-Semitism that does still exist in some places today and it does no one any good in terms of trying to combat that anti-Semitism when the phrase is bandied about so loosely.

WG In closing, let's look at one more aspect of this if we may. Do you see the fact that groups and movements are emerging all over the world in the cause of peace – in the cause of peace in the Middle East? Do you see that as a sign that something is happening deep in humanity's psyche? And do you see a subjective momentum growing, something growing that is adding to the pressure for a changed attitude and a peaceful co-existence and even perhaps a way that meditation and prayer can help to affect such a change?

DL I believe that political problems need political solutions. People find their own ways of dealing with situations and searching for the capacity to keep going and to believe and to strengthen their own beliefs in many ways – and I respect anything that can help produce a political outcome. It's about political mobilisation.

WG But your work is surely making a difference at the Century Foundation

DL Hope so. (Laughs)

WG No. You've made a real difference. And certainly when you spoke to the United Nations Association here in New York, everyone was so inspired as will listeners to this. Thank you so much for your time and your perspective and your inspiration.

DL Thank you.