

The Geneva Initiative, more relevant than ever?

Nidal Foqaha and Gadi Baltiansky, the two leaders of the Geneva Initiative that was created 20 years ago, were in Switzerland this week. They say they are convinced that the moment has come to take the Initiative out of the back drawer and end the ongoing suffering in the Middle East.

Finally, we hear them! It's a paradox: while an unprecedented war rages in Gaza, while the "peace camp" has never seemed so invisible in Israel as well as in Palestine, the leaders of the Geneva Initiative would like to believe that their turn has now come.

What's the Geneva Initiative? It remains the most ambitious peace agreement ever reached between Palestinians and Israelis, over 20 years ago. From border demarcation between the two states to the fate of the Israeli colonies and the status of Jerusalem, the Accord was intended to settle the disputes between the two peoples down to the smallest details. But after the initial euphoria, the Accord was forgotten. Even in Switzerland, which was the main original political sponsor, turned away from it. Deciding that the Initiative lacked "relevance to today's reality in the Middle East," it halted funding after the end of last year. The Initiative is "detached from the present reality," according to the justification of Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis.

Interest in Bern

However, the ending of funds does not mean the ending of interest. In Bern, where they have been since the beginning of this week, the two representatives of the Geneva Initiative – Palestinian Nidal Foqaha and Israeli Gadi Baltiansky – met with Swiss parliamentarians from diverse parties, as well as officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs. The two men are convinced that in Bern, as elsewhere, the content of this comprehensive agreement has not aroused this much interest for a long time.

Gadi Baltiansky, the Israeli: "People, sometimes unexpectedly, come to us with this question: 'What was the Accord, again?'" Josep Borrell, the senior European diplomat, recently met with them. So did several Israeli Knesset members, political advisors, and international think tanks. Nidal Foqaha, the Palestinian: "The suffering is such, currently, on the Palestinian side, that it could also serve as an accelerator," he believes. "We are interested in whatever can stop us from ever finding ourselves in the same situation in the future."

The two men direct two separate branches of the Geneva Initiative in Tel Aviv and Ramallah. Before October 7, 2023, their organizations had many meetings, presentations in schools, tours along the "Green Line (the 1949 Armistice Line), and attempts at diplomatic lobbying. "We know how Israelis and Palestinians react to the proposals on paper," added Gadi Baltiansky. "The Geneva Initiative constitutes a sort of manual for understanding the core disputed issues. Faced with each of these issues, the solutions were considered and debated at length."

The "Two State Solution," which the Geneva Initiative represents as a concrete application, received the approval (at least in theory) of the United States under Joe Biden, the European Union and the G7 (the group of the world's most powerful economic actors). Switzerland, as well, has made it a central element of its strategy in the Middle East. In this context, even if they do not wish to "interfere" in decisions of other countries, the two men question those who are

reluctant to recognize the existence of a Palestinian state. “We must shake up the situation, and not wait for so-called ideal conditions that allow us to advance. We must have the courage to create these conditions,” continues Gadi Baltiansky. “Those who want a prosperous and secure Middle East must take action. Remaining passive in the face of the ongoing catastrophes is not the correct path.”

A Geneva Initiative no longer supported by Switzerland? The question of possibly renewing Swiss funding was not on the agenda of the discussions in Bern. But the surprise remains: “Switzerland was very engaged in this process for two decades,” recalls Nidal Foqaha. “And when we are asked where it stands today in relation to the Initiative that it contributed to greatly to the creation of, we are... A bit embarrassed.”