



Peace Voices in the Middle East

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Focus on the Geneva Initiative, Hinuch le Shalom and the Palestinian Peace Coalition.

On October 7, 2023, one of the most devastating terrorist attacks in the history of the Middle East conflict occurred. The terrorist organization Hamas attacked Israeli border areas and killed hundreds of Israeli civilians. Families have been torn apart, people have been kidnapped and entire communities destroyed. The ensuing military actions in Gaza also brought enormous suffering there and exacerbated the already existing humanitarian crisis. This tragedy has brought to the fore the urgency of a solution to the decades-long conflict.

Sustainable peace in the Middle East can only be achieved through a negotiated two-state solution. A solution that respects both the sovereignty, security and dignity of Israelis and the rights and sovereignty of Palestinians. In the midst of pain and destruction, organizations such as the *Geneva Initiative*, *Hinuch le Shalom* and the *Palestinian Peace Coalition (PPC)* are working to preserve hope, build bridges, and pave the way for peaceful coexistence.

The *Stuttgart Lehrhaus Foundation*, under the leadership of its founders Karl-Hermann Blickle (blessed A.) and Lisbeth Blickle, had been involved in peace work in Israel for years. In collaboration with these projects, which focus on dialogue, education and interreligious understanding, we support local efforts to create a just and sustainable future for both peoples.

The Geneva Initiative: A Plan for Peace

The *Geneva Initiative* was launched in 2003 to develop a detailed plan for a two-state solution. This includes proposals on the key points of conflict – including borders, Jerusalem, the refugee issue and security issues – and provides a realistic framework for a peace agreement.

Under the leadership of Gadi Baltiansky, director of the Israeli side, and Nidal Foqaha, director of the Palestinian side, the *Geneva Initiative* works to promote understanding through dialogue. Both emphasise the importance of cooperation between political and religious actors. »Peace can only come about if we learn to understand the other side's perspective and develop solutions together«, says Nidal Foqaha.

A highlight of the initiative was a seminar in August 2023, which brought together 19 young leaders from Israel and Palestine. Led by Israella Oron, a former Israeli army officer, and Jamal Zakout, an experienced Palestinian advisor, topics such as the significance of Al-Aqsa/Temple Mount and the role of religious narratives were intensively discussed. The participants reported a change of perspective and new insights into the possibility of cooperation.

Hinuch le Shalom: Peace through Education

Hinuch le Shalom (Education for Peace) was founded to provide a platform for young Israelis to learn about and question the narratives of the other side. The aim is to break down prejudices through seminars and to create the foundation for a respectful dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. The organization's programs are aimed at youth, students and young leaders from different religious and political backgrounds.

Tehila Wenger, a Jewish activist and education director, is a central figure in *Hinuch le Shalom*. With her experience in intercultural dialogue and her passion for peace, Wenger leads many of the programs. »It is our task to equip young people not only with knowledge, but also with empathy. This is the only way we can build a bridge between the deep trenches of the conflict«, she explains.

An example of *Hinuch le Shalom*'s work was a workshop in April 2024 in Jerusalem that brought together 25 participants from different political and religious backgrounds. Topics such as the significance of the Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa and the role of religious narratives were discussed controversially but respectfully. Wenger emphasised: »Our goal is to create spaces in which difficult questions can be asked and joint solutions can be found.«

Palestinian Peace Coalition: A Voice for Hope and Dialogue

The *Palestinian Peace Coalition* (PPC) is the Palestinian partner organization of the *Geneva Initiative* and a central actor in the promotion of dialogue and peacebuilding within Palestinian society. It is committed to the dissemination and acceptance of the two-state solution and strengthens civil society through education and dialogue programmes.

At the head of the PPC is Nidal Foqaha, a veteran peace activist who, together with his assistant, works tirelessly to build bridges between the Palestinian communities and the Israeli side. Foqaha sees youth as the key to peacebuilding and emphasizes: »Only if we involve the next generation can we lay the foundations for sustainable peace.«

Under his leadership, the PPC regularly organises workshops that focus on women and young people. An example of this is an all-female workshop in Nablus, where participants had the opportunity to discuss leadership and overcoming cultural and religious differences. »Women often play a silent but crucial role in peace processes. We need to involve their voices more«, Foqaha explains.

Another highlight was a workshop in Bethlehem in May 2024 that focused on the importance of Jerusalem and the possibility of using the city as a symbol of reconciliation. Under the direction of Ahmad Rweidy, religious and cultural perspectives were analysed in order to promote dialogue between the communities.

Joint seminars and interreligious dialogues

The cooperation between the *Geneva Initiative*, *Hinuch le Shalom* and the *PPC* is often visible in joint seminars. A particularly inspiring example was the seminar in June 2024, which brought together religious leaders such as Sheikh Abbas Zakour and Rabbanit Hadassa Froman. Topics such as the role of religion in peace processes and the handling of historical narratives were intensively discussed.

Roei Ravitzky, an expert on religion and conflict resolution, emphasized: »Religion can promote polarization, but it can also serve as a bridge. It's up to us how we use their power.« These seminars provide a space for honest exchange and the development of strategies on how religious and cultural values can be used for a peaceful future.

October 7, 2023 has once again revealed the deep wounds and despair in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But as the examples of the *Geneva Initiative*, *Hinuch le Shalom* and the *Palestinian Peace Coalition* show, even in these difficult times, talks and peace efforts are taking place. These organizations prove that despite the tragedies, there is the will and the possibility to create a better future.

The work of Tehila Wenger, Nidal Foqaha and their teams illustrates that dialogue, education and mutual understanding are not just visions, but concrete paths to peace. It is a message of hope that even in times of pain and destruction, the seeds of reconciliation are sown.

The *Stuttgart Lehrhaus Foundation* will continue to support these projects because we are convinced that peace begins with the willingness to listen – and the courage to act together.

Hasan Dadelen is the Foundation Officer of the *Stuttgart Lehrhaus Foundation*. Stuttgart Lehrhaus Foundation for Interfaith Dialogue promotes dialogue between the believers of the three monotheistic religions – Jews, Christians and Muslims – based on tolerance, understanding, appreciation and equality. Homepage: www.stuttgarter-lehrhaus.de.

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