

The 4th Herzliya Conference 2003

Introduction to the Conference

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The third Herzliya Conference, held last year, celebrated the 120th anniversary of the genesis of the modern Zionist enterprise and the first wave of immigration, the First Aliya. The fourth Herzliya Conference, being held this week, commemorates the centenary of “Storms in the South” – the series of murderous pogroms against Jews throughout Southern Russia, the Ukraine, and Belarus. It also marks the sixth Zionist Congress, which debated the ‘Uganda Proposal’, the first appearance of organized Jewish self-defense against the rioters in Gomel (Belarus), and the immigration of these combatants to the Land of Israel in late 1903, thus commencing the Second Aliya (1904-1914).

Such a long-term perspective is often necessary for those at the helm when dealing with current affairs, let alone for strategic planners. Concluding last year’s Conference, the Prime Minister, in his first ‘Herzliya Address’, outlined his diplomatic strategy that entailed adopting the ‘Roadmap’ as he envisioned it. It then seemed to those of us at the Conference that this strategy would constitute Israel’s course following the then-imminent event – a war in Iraq. Even then, Conference participants were discernibly concerned about the ‘day after’.

The ‘day after’ is already behind us. The United States conquered Iraq easily enough and, later, officially launched the Roadmap. Iraq’s ruler however, has since gone into hiding and the stabilization of Iraq has encountered serious difficulties. The Palestinian ruler has also remained at his post, thereby depriving the Palestinians of a new leadership that would be able and willing to enter the Roadmap process. Thus, terror and violence continue to reign in both the Iraqi and the Palestinian-Israeli realms. This week, Prime Minister Sharon will once again honor the Herzliya Conference and deliver his second ‘Herzliya Address’, in which he will probably sketch out the principles of his new strategy in light of evolving circumstances.

The very term ‘strategy’ has multiple uses: the course of dealing with an adversary; long-range planning; prioritizing among goals and options; and, finally, strategy may also connote the action of the strategist, i.e., leadership. The themes of this year’s Conference reflect the wide scope of Israel’s national agenda, as well as the current unique reality – the urgent need for strategy in all of the meanings above. The economic situation has created a forbidding inevitability forcing prioritization between the requirements of defense and those of the social and education sectors, which rank high in any national security balance. The impasse in the peace process, continuing Arab-Palestinian enmity towards Israel, nourished by mounting anti-Semitic hatred, necessitates complex maneuvering and choices between different options, unilateral or other, whilst the battle and struggle continue. Developments in the international arena and threatening processes in the region, such as the ominous prospect of a nuclear Iran, call for a long-term and sober assessment, which should yield short-term policy actions. This Conference’s deliberations, along with the task force reports specially prepared for the Conference, will suggest new ideas and proposals, which hopefully will be put to the Israel decision-makers. One thing, however, is evident – Israel’s situation and the wide ranging policy actions required call for statesmanship and leadership at the highest level. The exhibition in the Conference venue’s foyer, displaying pictures of the Second Aliya, may prompt one to reflect on the fate of the Jewish people, as it is still subject to repeated storms and threats a century later. Just as the dispute regarding the ‘Uganda Proposal’ divided the Zionist Congress one hundred years ago, Israeli society today is divided over the appropriate strategy concerning its most existential questions. It is comforting to note however, that in spite of the dividing disputes, Israelis could have relied on their leaders’ vision, always tempered by pragmatism, and upon their own creativity, steadfastness, and resilience. These qualities are once again being put to the test. Yet, in order to tackle head on the challenges currently facing Israel, it is essential that strategic decisions be taken in view of the national interest – transcending partisan or sectorial consideration. This is the leadership imperative at this juncture. This is also the inspiring legacy of Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, whose passing thirty years ago we will be marking at the outset of this year’s Conference.

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