

The Israeli Summit

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Talking national security in Herzliya.

HERZLIYA, ISRAEL—My cabbie drove effortlessly through the early evening, bumper-to-bumper Tel Aviv traffic on the way to taking me to the opening reception of the fourth annual Herzliya Conference on Israeli national security. The hottest ticket in town this week, the three-day panel-packed event has become during its short life a who's who of the Israeli academic, military, and political establishment. My driver, however, was of the view that the source of Israel's national-security predicament was simple: the obsession with revenge that afflicts the Middle East.

To illustrate the kind of neighborhood in which Israel lives, he told me a joke. Two statues stood facing each other in the town square, that of a beautiful young woman and that of a handsome young man. One day God took pity on the statues and decided to give them a few hours to frolic as flesh-and-blood human beings. No sooner had God transformed them and explained his gift, than they jumped off their pedestals and dashed off into the woods. Soon laughter could be heard. God decided to take a look at what the statues, now in human form, were up to. In a clearing, the young woman was clutching a pigeon intently. The young man approached her with anticipation in his eyes and gleefully instructed, "Now, hold the pigeon tight. It's my turn to sh*t on *him*."

In fact, there was little over the last three days in upscale, beachfront Herzliya to suggest that Israel had succumbed to the spirit of revenge. The conference is the brainchild of Professor Uriel Reichman, a lawyer and president and founder of the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel's only private university, and of Uzi Arad, former director of intelligence at the Mossad and now head of the Interdisciplinary Center's Institute for Policy and Strategy. Their Conference reflects their conviction that national security extends far beyond questions of strictly military strategy. And so for three days, from eight in the morning to nine in the evening, with scarcely any let up—even the meals featured addresses by major political figures—the conference presented panels to the 900 or so invitees on a remarkable range of topics. They ranged from the various fronts—Palestinian, Iranian, Iraqi—in the war on terror, to the frightening rise of antisemitism; from privatization of Israel's moribund economy to the improvement of the situation of Israel's Arab minority; from fortifying the rule of law in Israel to transforming Israel's decrepit educational system. As Shmuel Bar, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Policy and Strategy and a member of the conferences steering

committee explained, “We understand national security broadly. For us it means all those beliefs, practices, and institutions that contribute to the survival, and promote the flourishing of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.”

Needless to say, complaints about the conference could be heard from the right and the left. On the right, critics wondered where were the panels on Islamofascism and on Arafat’s corrupt tyranny. On the left, critics wondered where were the panels featuring moderate Palestinians, or discussing the recently signed Geneva Accords. For critics on both sides, the conference was too self-satisfied, too much a gabfest for the establishment, too much a place to see and to be seen, too much a glitzy showcase for the conventional wisdom. But to ask it to be other than these things is to ask more of a large conference than it can conceivably offer.

The highlight was Ariel Sharon’s much anticipated closing address at dinner on Thursday. Last year, in the same venue, the Israeli prime minister gave a major policy speech, announcing the so-called roadmap to peace. The roadmap affirms the need for a two-state solution and bases peace on the achievement of security, not the other way around. It calls on the Palestinians to eliminate terrorism, and for Israel to take steps to ease the conditions under which Palestinians live, in preparation for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Sharon delivered another major policy speech this year, although he did so by giving forceful expression to a view that he and his allies have been sketching for some time now. He reaffirmed in no uncertain terms his acceptance of the principles of the roadmap, including a solemn commitment to the United States to dismantle illegal settlements. At the same time, he declared to Israelis, to Palestinians, and to the whole world (Israeli TV, CNN International, and Al Jazeera all covered the speech) that Israel cannot wait indefinitely for the Palestinians to come in good faith to the negotiating table. If within a “few months” the Palestinians do not “abandon the path of terror,” then Israel will unilaterally separate from the Palestinians.

The centerpiece of what Sharon called the “Disengagement Plan” involves the accelerated building of the security fence, which will divide Israel from the West Bank. Its principal aim, Sharon insisted, is security, to prevent terror. Should the Palestinians, after the fence is complete, meet the requirement of renouncing and rooting out terror, Israel would be prepared, assured Sharon, to return to the roadmap. But he also forthrightly stated that the Palestinians will receive much less through the Disengagement Plan imposed unilaterally by Israel in the face of continuing terrorism than through the roadmap hammered out after the Palestinians have clearly rejected terrorism, and taken decisive actions to bring it to an end.

Sharon’s Disengagement Plan reflects a consensus in Israel, indeed, a stunningly large and intense consensus. Probably not more than 15 of the Knesset’s 120 members stand today clearly on the traditional left, supporting a return to Israel’s pre-1967 borders. And probably no more than 15 stand on the traditional right, opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state.

That leaves the other 90 members, 75 percent of the Knesset, standing with Sharon. According to recent public-opinion polls, today's Knesset more or less reflects contemporary Israeli public opinion.

The consensus that underlies Sharon's Disengagement Plan is the result of two developments, both a consequence of rethinking and soul searching provoked by the war on Israel that Arafat has been waging since September 2000. Many who formerly occupied a place on the right of the Israeli political spectrum have accepted the idea, long typical of the Israeli Left, that the Palestinians must have their own state. And many who formerly occupied a position on the left of the Israeli political spectrum have accepted the idea, long typical of the Israeli Right, that so long as the dictator Arafat is in charge, there is nobody to negotiate with among the Palestinians.

Everywhere one looks, Israel is exposed to grave threats. Notwithstanding the inevitable posturing and preening that attend big conferences for governing elites in fancy hotels, the Herzliya conference's civilized give and take, its professionally crafted papers and presentations, and its brute commitment to public discussion of a panoply of major issues connected to Israel's survival and flourishing suggest that the Jewish state is bravely resisting the temptation to lose itself in the quest for revenge. Liberal democracy is alive and well in Israel. But, as my cab driver pointed out when I asked, after chuckling at his joke, whether Israel differed from its adversaries: Defending yourself day in and day out in a neighborhood where the lust for revenge rages exacts a heavy toll, not the least part of which is the wearing down of one's defenses against that all-too-human and deeply dehumanizing contagion.

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