

Independence Key Issue at Student Zionist Conference



by Avi Yellin

The 25th day of the Hebrew month of Shvat, falling on Saturday night and Sunday, was marked by events throughout Israel honoring the memory of slain Jewish underground leader Avraham “Yair” Stern. Stern, who founded and led the Fighters for the Freedom of Israel (known in Hebrew as *Lehi* and labeled the ‘Stern Gang’ by the British), was assassinated while handcuffed 69 years ago by British detectives in Tel Aviv.

While memorial services and gatherings of veteran freedom fighters took place throughout the country, one event in particular actually called the youth to action in carrying Yair’s legacy forward.

The Third Annual Student Conference of Revolutionary Zionism, organized by the Zionist Freedom Alliance Saturday night, drew a standing-room-only crowd of student activists and focused on “appraising the progress of the Zionist Revolution and working to identify the goals to be achieved by today’s activists.”

Following the ceremonial lighting of a memorial candle for the martyred underground leader and a discussion focused on recent political upheavals in the Middle East, Tzvi Richman of the Israeli Committee for a Free Kurdistan spoke of Yair as a balanced Jewish revolutionary.

Student activists Ben Neiwood, Nathan Shames and Daniel Iken then addressed the crowd with a joint presentation seeking to identify their generation’s Zionist goals. While topics such a peace with other Middle Eastern peoples and bringing the remaining Jews home to Israel from the Diaspora were touched upon, the presentation largely focused on ending the Jewish state’s dependency on foreign aid from the United States.

The next presenter, Z’ev Golan of the Jerusalem Institute for Market Studies, strengthened the students’ argument by enumerated for participants the many ways in which he views foreign aid actually harming the State of Israel.

“US economic aid does Israel more harm than good,” he argued. “By being tied to similar assistance to unstable or unfriendly Arab regimes, it forces Israel to spend more on defense just to keep up with its neighbors. Because the US requires Israel to spend 75% of the aid in the United States, it is really nothing more than a US government subsidy to its own military industry, from which Israel must buy whether it needs to or not.”

“In the early 1950s and 1960s,” he continued. “Israel’s economy was growing at the same rate as Japan and Hong Kong. From 1950-1973, Israel’s GDP grew at an average rate of about 5.6 per cent. In 1973 Israel began to receive massive amounts of free money from the US and from that year until the turn of the century its growth rate averaged only 1.5%. Politicians knew they didn’t have to fix deficits, they could more easily ask the US for more money.”

The final speaker, ZFA Director-General Yehuda HaKohen, delivered a passionate address about the legacy of Yair in modern times and identified political and economic independence as “the great cause of our generation.”

The conference and its message of independence came in the immediate wake of a minor political controversy generated by US Senator Rand Paul (R – Kentucky) last week. While appearing as a guest on Wolf Blitzer’s program, Paul advocated restraining federal spending by cutting US aid to foreign nations. When Blitzer asked specifically about foreign aid to Israel, Paul replied that aid to Israel should also be stopped and arguing that “when you send foreign aid, you actually [send] quite a bit to Israel’s enemies, Islamic nations around Israel get quite a bit of foreign aid, too.”

“I don’t think funding both sides of the arm race, particularly when we have to borrow the money from China to send it to someone else, we just can’t do it anymore,” he said.

Pro-Israel groups in the US, especially the Republican Jewish Coalition, were fast to castigate Senator Paul for his statements, especially his position that aid to Israel actually undermines Israel’s national interest, a position Paul seems to have in common with many young Zionist activists attending Saturday evening’s event.

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