
Herut talks with PLO backers aimed at meeting with Shamir

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Likud central committee member Moshe Amirav indicated in secret discussions with three top PLO backers in East Jerusalem that Prime Minister Shamir was interested in meeting them to discuss Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Bir Zeit professor Sari Nusseibeh told *The Jerusalem Post* yesterday.

Amirav gave the clear impression that Shamir knew about the contacts over the past four months in which he and Nusseibeh, Arab Studies Society head Faisal Hussein, and Salah Zuharka, an editor of the *Ash-Sha'ab* newspaper, discussed guidelines for an interim arrangement of "wide-ranging self-rule" for the Palestinians, Nusseibeh said.

But a spokesman for Shamir last night denied that the prime minister

had any intention of meeting with the PLO supporters. "Such a meeting was not proposed, and if it would have been proposed, it would have been rejected outright," said spokesman Yossi Ahimeir. Amirav confirmed that he had not raised the matter with Shamir, but said that he was "convinced" that the prime minister would have agreed to meet Hussein, Nusseibeh and other Palestinian leaders.

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had any intention of meeting with the PLO supporters. "Such a meeting was not proposed, and if it would have been proposed, it would have been rejected outright," said spokesman Yossi Ahimeir. Amirav confirmed that he had not raised the matter with Shamir, but said that he was "convinced" that the prime minister would have agreed to meet Husseini, Nusseibeh and other Palestinian leaders.

Amirav has held several meetings since July with the three Palestinians at his home and in East Jerusalem. Husseini, a leading Palestinian activist, has since been arrested under a six-month administrative detention order. The meetings, initiated through peace activist David Ish-Shalom, focused on papers drawn up by Amirav, which were revised after consultation with the Palestinians, Nusseibeh said.

The discussions were followed by a meeting between Nusseibeh and Likud MK Ehud Olmert, in which the two held general discussions, but did not go into the details of Amirav's proposals. Olmert said that the two had discussed the possibility of "contacts with other elements in the Likud, including people in the government," but that Shamir was not mentioned.

Nusseibeh said that a meeting between himself, Olmert and Likud MK Dan Meridor was cancelled after press leaks, but that he and Meridor spoke on the phone about arranging a later meeting. Nusseibeh said the meetings appeared to be planned as preliminaries to a meeting with Shamir.

The meetings, according to Nusseibeh, were apparently aimed at developing a peace strategy for Shamir and the Likud, as an alternative to the peace moves of Foreign Minister Peres, who advocates talks with Jordan and Palestinians in an international conference. "We were given the impression that this is a Likud peace offensive," Nusseibeh said, adding that it coincided with public calls by Shamir for direct talks without an international conference.

The meetings were also meant to pave the way for a planned meeting between Amirav and Arafat this month at Geneva, which was cancelled after Amirav decided not to attend. Nusseibeh confirmed that he had gone to Geneva, but said he decided not to participate in Israeli meetings with Arafat, because of Amirav's cancellation.

Amirav proposed a meeting between Shamir and a group of Palestinian public figures to be headed by Husseini, Nusseibeh said. "What he was suggesting, was that Mr. Shamir will want to meet with people of several kinds of political opinions, and not just PLO backers," he said. The Palestinians were told that while Peres held public meetings

with great fanfare, Shamir preferred to work quietly, but achieve real results, he said.

According to Nusseibeh, Amirav favoured talks with the PLO, recognition of the Palestinian right to self-determination and establishment of state, along with recognition of Israel and its right to security. He said understanding had been reached on Amirav's proposal for an interim arrangement of expanded self rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which would provide for Palestinian control of land and resources, as well as autonomous government over people. The arrangement would provide for the withdrawal of Israeli troops to specific locations, and creation of a demilitarized Palestinian "entity" which would have its capital in East Jerusalem and trappings of nationhood: a flag, its own currency, and its own identity cards, he said.

Clearly embarrassed at the revelations, the Likud last night tried to downplay the importance of Amirav's initiatives, describing them as "unripe", "naive" and a "public relations ploy". Ahimeir said that Amirav had actually "played into the hands of the PLO" by supplying the organization with further substantiation for its efforts to portray itself as a "political entity".

Labour's Energy Minister Moshe Shahal quickly pounced on the Likud's embarrassment last night, saying that he demands an explanation from Shamir about the "contacts with PLO elements" and whether the meetings were carried out with Shamir's knowledge.

In a letter sent to Shamir last night, Amirav writes that "In light of the public storm, I feel that I owe an explanation - and not an apology" for the meetings. Amirav notes that the Palestinian leaders with whom he met said that they "prefer to reach an agreement with the Likud", and that he found "changed attitudes", especially concerning the autonomy proposals.

Although Shamir's office has denied any involvement in Amirav's moves, it did receive several weeks ago his detailed proposal for an expanded version of the Camp David autonomy proposals, titled "A Framework for Peace in Greater Israel." Further, the prime minister's office has conceded that it heard "rumours" of Amirav's meetings, and had made no attempt to stop them.