

Somebody's thinking

SOMEONE in Herut has decided to take the idea of Palestinian autonomy seriously.

That someone is Moshe Amirav, a member of Herut's central committee who made his mark most recently as head of the Road Safety Authority. In an effort to help his party chief Yitzhak Shamir shake off the unwanted burden of Shimon Peres's initiative for an international conference, Mr. Amirav hit on the idea of offering Palestinian leaders an expanded version of the autonomy prescribed at Camp David.

A lean, dehydrated version of the Camp David autonomy as a system of self-rule "for the people, not for the land" has been at the heart of Mr. Shamir's own negotiating formula, which he contends is mandated by the present government's policy guidelines. Mr. Amirav must sometime this year have reached the conclusion that this formula, the main purpose of which is to keep the autonomy from building up into an independent state, is self-defeating, and has no chance of ever being accepted as a basis for consideration by even the most moderate local Arabs.

Not so an autonomy that would grant the Palestinians control of their land and its resources in addition to authority over themselves as a people, and that would be formalized into a demilitarized state-like entity with its own flag, currency and a capital in East Jerusalem. That, Mr. Amirav evidently reasoned, promised at once Palestinian endorsement and the integrity of the Land under Israel's overall sovereignty.

During the past four months Mr. Amirav thrashed his ideas out in private discussions with three leading PLO supporters: Dr. Sari Nusseibeh, the Bir Zeit University philosopher, Arab Studies Society head Faisal Hussein, and Salah Zuhaika, editor of the East Jerusalem newspaper *Ash-Sha'ab*. The three Palestinians, who were given to understand that Mr. Shamir was himself privy to the contacts and approved of them, were interested, and themselves contributed to the elaboration of Mr. Amirav's proposals.

Armed with the belief that he was doing what was best for Greater Eretz Yisrael and the Likud, and that a number of younger Herut leaders such as Dan Meridor and Ehud Olmert saw eye to eye with him, Mr. Amirav was reportedly even prepared to go to Geneva for a meeting earlier this month with Yasser Arafat. Without in any way acknowledging the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, he believed it is a contradiction in terms to insist on boycotting the PLO, whatever shape or manner it may assume, yet hope for peace with the Palestinians.

Then the news about Mr. Amirav's initiative leaked out, and Mr. Shamir promptly sent word through his spokesman that he believed Mr. Amirav had played into the hands of the PLO, and that it would never even have occurred to him to meet with any of Mr. Amirav's Palestinian interlocutors.

Now Mr. Amirav may have gone too far, certainly farther than the Labour Party's preference for a "Jordanian option". But he clearly believed he was serving the cause of the nation, the party and Mr. Shamir.

And that deserves welcome. For it shows that somewhere in Herut, behind and beyond the bombast of Haim Kaufman, David Levy and Arik Sharon, there are those of the younger generation who are thinking, who understand that automatic *nyets* or flatulent cliches are not good enough for a party that claims the right to lead the country.

J.P. 2/19