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Faisal Husseini



Sari Nusseibeh

Retreat from dialogue

Joel Greenberg reports on
Palestinian reaction to the talks
between Sari Nusseibeh and
Likud member Moshe Amirav.



Moshe Amirav

THE BEATING this week of Birzeit University professor Sari Nusseibeh after revelations of his talks with Likud members has exposed the undercurrent of suspicion in the Palestinian community about the discussions.

While the talks between party central committee member Moshe Amirav, MK Ehud Olmert and PLO backers have caused embarrassment and an uproar in the Likud, they have also elicited censure of the three Palestinian participants in their own camp. Nusseibeh has kept silent since the assault, Arab Studies Society head Faisal Husseini is in jail under a six-month administrative detention order and thus incommunicado; Salah Zuheikeh, an editor of the newspaper *Ash-Shaab*, has begun to defend his moves.

At a press conference in Jerusalem yesterday, Zuheikeh took pains to emphasize that his group had not conceded on any of the basic points of the PLO's political platform. While carefully noting that the talks were not negotiations, and that only the PLO was authorized to conclude agreements, he said that the three had insisted on the basic Palestinian positions: the PLO is the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; the Palestinians have the right to self determination, the establishment of an independent state, and to return to their homeland.

ZUHEIKAH'S statements appeared to be backed up by a document he presented, which he said contained negotiation guidelines written by Amirav, and acceptable to participants in the discussions. The points included recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians, and of the Palestinians' right to a state of their own beside Israel.

However, a separate document outlining an interim arrangement for expanded Palestinian self-rule -- agreed on but not signed in the discussions -- gave some indication of why the Palestinian participants had drawn criticism. While the document spoke of the Palestinian right

to self-determination and said the PLO is their sole legitimate representative, it significantly omitted mention of the ultimate goal of establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

Instead it spoke of a Palestinian "entity" to be established for an interim period, which would have the trappings of nationhood (a flag, a national anthem, a currency, travel documents, etc.) and provide Palestinians with control of natural resources, as well as self-government.

This document, more modest than the guidelines attributed to Amirav, drew sharp questions from one Palestinian journalist at the press conference, who noted its omissions of the final Palestinian goal of independence. Zuheikeh, on the defensive, said the Palestinian participants had not come to talk to the Likud about accepting self-rule, "which is rejected by the Palestinian people."

Zuheikeh's difficulties were evident, but so was his attempt to portray himself and his partners as trying to encourage moderates in the Likud while not conceding any fundamental Palestinian demands. THIS WAS apparently not good enough for significant segments of Palestinian public opinion, if one is to judge by editorials in the East Jerusalem press, and statements by certain Palestinian spokesmen.

At Birzeit University, where Nusseibeh was beaten, there was speculation that the attack was not necessarily the work of radical supporters of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, but could have been carried out by headline Fatah supporters. Campus leaflets signed by both PFLP and Fatah factions charged that Nusseibeh's meetings with the Likud were a deviation from the PLO's official line of maintaining contacts solely with "progressive forces" in Israel.

The head of the Birzeit student council told reporters this week that he favoured meetings only with Israelis who supported the Palestinian cause, and not those who wanted to hurt it, like the Labour Party and the Likud.

The Fatah-dominated council denounced the attack, but added that the faction disagreed with Nusseibeh's political positions. Nusseibeh's prediction that Palestinians would soon demand equal political rights in the Israeli system has brought accusations in the past that, by implication, he supported annexation of the territories to Israel.

AN EDITORIAL in the East Jerusalem *Al-Quds* newspaper reflected the wariness among Palestinians regarding contacts with the Likud, long considered an extreme party with which there was no hope of reaching a real settlement. According to the paper, the question was whether the reported talks indeed showed that the Likud was more ready for peace than Labour, or were rather a reflection of competition between the two parties, for which the Palestinians would pay the price. "Indications are that everything we hear and read is nothing more than a public relations campaign, and political traps laid by the Israeli unity government," the paper concluded.

The *An-Nahar* newspaper, more supportive of Jordan, reflected the shock in Amman over revelations of direct PLO overtures to Israel. It asked whether the talks with the Likud had produced anything better than the 1985 Hussein-Arafat accord, which outlined guidelines for a negotiated peace. The paper asserted that the Palestinian participants had usurped the position of the PLO as the sole party which can negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians. Calling the talks "dangerous," it said they undermined the decisions of Arab summit conferences and pan-Arab agreement on the need to convene an international Middle East peace conference on the basis of UN resolutions 242 and 338.

The consensus among Palestinians of various political opinions appeared to be, therefore, that while the assault on Nusseibeh was to be condemned in the strongest possible terms, his talks with Likud personalities should be viewed with a healthy dose of scepticism.