

Mideast trip new test for Clark and PC govt.

CITIZEN MARCH 15 1986

DAMASCUS

External Affairs Minister Joe Clark's April Middle East tour will fully test his diplomatic skills as well as Canada's ability to raise its regional profile.

With little to gain in the short run and much to lose, Clark will visit Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel beginning April 3 in Amman, the Jordanian capital.

While it wasn't planned that way, the first Mideast trip by a

Canadian minister since the Conservatives returned to power comes at a particularly difficult time in what is arguably the world's most sensitive area.



Clark

Political instability and the collapse of the peace process have increased tension between Israel and its Arab neighbors while the oil price nose-dive has brought hard times to almost every Middle East state.

On top of that, Clark has his own cross to bear. During his three-day visit to Israel, the former prime minister will certainly be questioned on his disastrous and subsequently broken 1979 election promise to move the Canadian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Israel, which seized Arab east Jerusalem during the 1967 war, still hopes to convince major Western allies to recognize the city, holy to Jew, Moslem and Christian, as its capital.

The issue is equally symbolic for Arabs, particularly the three million Palestinians determined to regain control of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Diplomats, including Canadians, are anxiously waiting to see how Clark will handle the legacy of his earlier blunder without upsetting Arab or Jew.

And that is but one of many pitfalls along the path of his 10-day tour. Each of the countries on his itinerary has particular and current problems.

In Jordan, moderate King Hussein is still recovering from the breakdown of his year-long attempt to bring the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel together at an international peace forum. Hussein's courageous and personally risky initiative failed for many reasons but they include a lack of commitment from the West.

Canada, with a government maintaining cosy relations with Washington, lacks the clout and independence to play peacemaker here where U.S. foreign policy is so controversial. While there is no doubt the peace issue will be discussed in most if not all the capitals he visits, Clark can be expected to do more listening than talking, at least in public.

In Saudi Arabia, where Canada has considerable business interests and hopes of more, Clark will come face to face with the new and painful Arab reality. Oil



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prices which have dropped more than \$12 per barrel since late last year have exacerbated the Gulf's economic slowdown.

Clark is scheduled to meet the man the world associates with oil, Sheik Yamani, as well as Canadian businessmen — a combination that should underline the difficulties of securing new contracts in a country with less black gold to spend.

Saudis are equally concerned about the Gulf war raging nearby. Iran's recent successful offensive against Iraq, heavily supported by Saudi and other Gulf states, has increased fears that the war will spread the Ayatollah's Khomeini's raw fundamentalism across the deeply conservative region.

Saudi Arabia, which supports — and some say exports — a more traditional brand of Islam, will have an unusual number of problems on its plate when the Canadian contingent arrives.

The same can be said for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who has just put down a dangerous, costly and humiliating mutiny by the Central Security Forces. That uprising, which claimed more than 100 lives and gutted the country's important tourist industry, exposed Egypt's serious political and economic problems.

Facing the triple threat of Islamic fundamentalism, Arab nationalism and economic recession, Mubarak will be seeking moral and financial support. Canada, which believes Egypt has great trade potential, will try to satisfy the first demand with kind words and the second by signing a line-of-credit agreement and a memorandum on a soil recovery aid project.

While Clark is not expected to involve Canada publicly in the peace process, he will likely encourage Egypt's relations with Israel — relations which have been cooled by Mubarak's internal problems and Egypt's interest in strengthening Arab links strained by the Camp David accords.

Perhaps unintentionally, Clark's Israel program recognizes the political reality of the fragile coalition government by including sessions with Labor Prime Minister Shimon Peres and the man scheduled to replace him in October, Foreign Minister and right-wing Likud Party leader Yitzhak Shamir.

In the past, Clark's road trips suffered bad reviews, but there is considerable optimism that this one will be more successful.

Now a more polished performer, Clark is not expected to bag any giant new contracts or play an active role in the peace process, but he may, with a bit of luck — and no lost luggage — put some lustre back on the government's tarnished image at home while showing the flag abroad.

WEEKEND OBSERVER

Page B10, The Citizen, Ottawa, Saturday, March 15, 1986