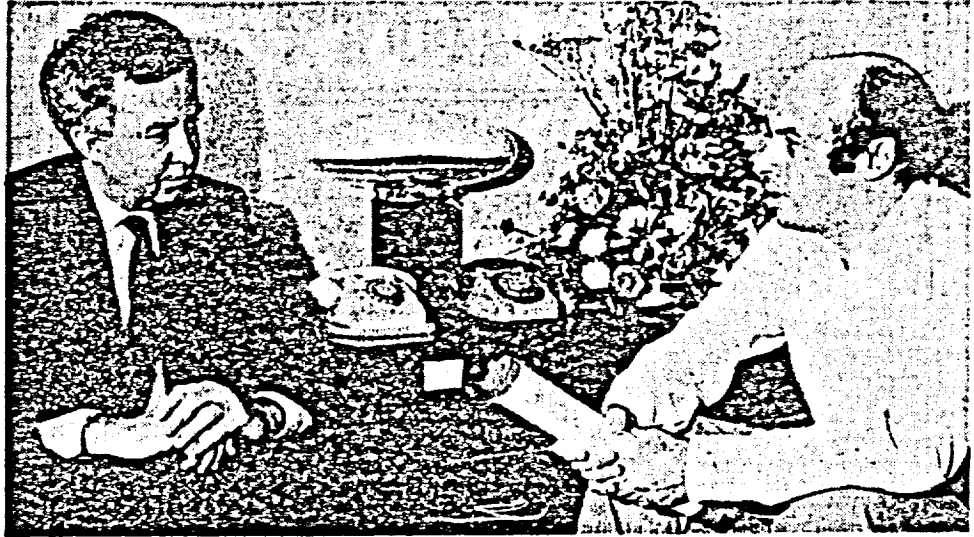


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UNEVENTFUL TRIP — External Affairs Minister Joe Clark, left, meets with Soviet dissident Anatoly Shcharansky in Jerusalem during Clark's mideast trip. He headed home to Canada Monday satisfied with his low-key swing through one of the

world's hotspots without the harsh glare of negative publicity a previous, error-prone trip had received. "It was a good trip; nothing dramatic happened," said Clark. (CP Laserphoto)

Benvenisti, who met Clark Sunday, argued that Jewish ownership of 52 per cent of the West Bank — one of the areas seized during the 1967 war — coupled with weak international political will has led to the annexation of the potential Palestinian homeland.

Diplomats, he told reporters after the meeting, are using outdated language to talk about a conflict that has changed so much that it is unrecognizable.

If Benvenisti is right — and he has a sizable following — the cornerstone of the peace process, as well Canadian foreign policy, is just dust.

That is only one of the worrying ideas that Clark is carrying home with him. Another one, whispered in every capital, is the growing risk of religious war.

Every country visited by Clark

is now in some way threatened by fundamentalism and no one is underestimating the dangers of a conflict rooted in fanaticism and fueled by economic unrest.

As one Arab minister put it, "The last thing the Middle East needs is a religious war."

Less disastrous but still worrying for Canada is its image in this part of the world.

Elias Freij, the Palestinian mayor of occupied Bethlehem summed it up this way after seeing Clark Saturday, "Canada has one eye on the Middle East and one eye on the United States."

How little manoeuvring room exists here can be measured by the debate over Canadian contacts with the PLO. Clark was neatly ambushed when it was leaked in Canada that he had been advised by a group of people, including

mentor Robert Stanfield, to recognize the PLO's importance by upgrading contacts to the ambassador level. Clark, who defends low-level contacts, had to sidestep what outsiders might consider a minor issue but one that would certainly spark controversy here.

Having carefully cultivated the seeds of small expectations before the trip, Clark and his staff can claim to have achieved their objectives. He has broadened his contacts and his knowledge in a region no foreign minister can ignore, while his careful performance during troubled times will largely erase the memory of blunders past.

Joe Clark's Middle East education is over, at least for the time being. What remains to be seen is if political realities will allow the lessons to be applied.

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