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Clark's Second Mideast Foray:**No New Insights, But No Glaring Blunders, Either**

By JAMES TRAVERS

Southam News

TEL AVIV — Joe Clark completed his second short course in Middle-East studies Monday with no failures but no new theses.

Before leaving Ben Gurion Airport for Paris, the external affairs minister characterized his trip as interesting but not seminal.

"We will be assessing what we have found but I don't expect any dramatic change in our policies," he said.

Clark was more revealing the night before when he casually told reporters, "It was a good trip; nothing dramatic happened."

So much happened on Clark's first trip here that he and his future government were branded as blunders.

But times have changed since 1979. Clark is much more confident and, as external affairs minister, he is not subjected to the unflinching scrutiny that plagued him as Conservative leader and then prime minister.

Flight Aborted

That small but important buffer now surrounding him was measured in the heat of a Sinai desert day. A warning light flashed as his Canadian peacekeeping force helicopter lifted-off and he was forced down. Unlike 1979, none of the reporters travelling with him fished for a notebook. Joe Clark's troubles are no longer news.

But there is more to Clark's renaissance than that. Supported by External Affairs and a more experienced staff, Clark is now well-briefed and, in contrast to 1979, well aware how thin-skinned Middle East leaders can be.

Clark was also protected by a decision not to build high expectations for a trip that realistically could do little more than show the flag while improving his contacts

and his understanding of this complex and explosive region.

All of those things were achieved but there was also a sense that Canada and Clark wanted to be seen as bit players in what is rapidly becoming the no-win peace game. Over and over, Clark told Arab leaders that Canada is a contributor to, not an architect of Middle East peace. And here in Israel, the former prime minister carefully restated Canadian policy but was careful not to offend his hosts by drawing attention to continued settlement of the West Bank or by being too precise about the shape of any future Palestinian homeland.

Clark's hosts almost matched his low-key and consistent approach. He was treated well but not lavishly and at every stop the same issues were discussed.

Shaded Views

Only shading their views to fit their geographical positions, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt expressed deep concern over the plight of Palestinians, the destabilizing Gulf war between Iran and Iraq and the political as well as the economic impact of slumping oil prices.

In all, seven leaders in those three countries made the case that the major cause of Middle East instability is the lack of progress in finding a home for the Palestinians. Remarkably, none of the leaders asked Clark to change Canada's policy on limited contacts with the Palestine Liberation Organization or to involve Canada directly in the now moribund peace process.

The closest anyone came to criticism of Canada's position was Saudi Arabia's Prince Saudi who encouraged western contacts with the PLO saying, "You have to make friends with the man who holds the gun, not just the people

who are friendly with you."

Clark's response was always the same; Canada won't recognize the man until he puts the gun down and acknowledges Israel's right to exist.

By the time he arrived here on the final leg of his four-country, 10-day trip, Clark had condensed most of Canadian Middle East policy into a paragraph.

"We fully support Israel's right to secure and recognized boundaries," he said. "We support the right of the Palestinians to a homeland within a clearly defined territory, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. We support Security Council Resolution 242 (guaranteeing secure borders) as the only sure way to a just and lasting peace."

Drew Some Conclusions

But Clark had also drawn some conclusions.

Speaking to a dinner held in his honor by Foreign Minister and Deputy Premier Yitzhak Shamir, Clark said he has "come away with a renewed conviction that, despite many difficulties, a foundation does exist on which peace can be built. I perceived an urgent quality to the desire for peace, an urgency born out of a deeply felt concern that, unless a settlement is reached soon, the region could again slide towards conflict."

Canadian foreign policy and Clark's perception that peace is possible are built around the same cornerstone; homelands for both Jew and Palestinian.

But pessimists, including some that Clark met, are convinced that continued Jewish settlement of the West Bank has made obsolete the United Nation's land-for-peace concept.

West Bank expert and former Jerusalem deputy mayor Meron