

Clark's Middle East tour could prove important

Next week External Affairs Minister Joe Clark sets out on his first official visit to the Middle East. He's going at a time when everything seems to be breaking down and nothing positive is in view on which to pin hopes for a peace settlement.

The itinerary? Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel. Undoubtedly the Canadian party will gain more than it gives. Its role should be mostly a listening one, except when we speak about Canada's wish to promote an impartial peace and to be viewed as a party sympathetic to the natural and national aspirations of the peoples of the region.

It's a pity Clark isn't visiting Syria this time. Lebanon, too. And other countries, each with their own problems that won't necessarily be promoted by their neighbors. The omission of Damascus denies the foreign minister a chance to share views with a principal actor who cannot be ignored, whether we like his policies or not.

In Amman, Clark will doubtless question King Hussein about the breakdown of the monarch's talks with Yasser Arafat, head of the PLO. In Cairo a few days ago Hussein described it as the end of the road "for the time being." What does that qualification mean? What else has been in mind? Where do we go from here?

What are the alternatives to having Arafat's PLO represent the Palestine people at peace talks? Or is the wily survivor of so many close scrapes with political and personal death merely playing a game? Does he believe that the Palestinian "homeland" within a clearly defined territory, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip — to quote Prime Minister Mulroney at the francophone summit — will become a reality by



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offering only words instead of real concessions?

King Hussein, if in the mood, could add greatly to Clark's knowledge of the PLO's bargaining techniques and real motives. His assessment of future peace prospects should prove to be invaluable. Our man will surely want to encourage Hussein to stay the course and offer a formula that will bring him into substantive talks with Israel's Prime Minister Shimon Peres on their bilateral relations, whether or not Palestinian ones can be arranged.

The question of Palestinian representation cannot be solved by Canada. Our policy is clear — we believe that their legitimate rights should be recognized and that they have the right to take full part in negotiations affecting their future.

Who should play that role is not a matter that far-off Canada has a right or a responsibility to pronounce on. That's up to the Palestinian people themselves and, practically, must eventually be agreed to by Jordan, Egypt and Israel.

The details of a negotiating formula have stymied Middle East progress for decades. The role of the U.S. — one it seems reluctant to play these days — must be a major one. Canada's attitude, on the other hand, has to be a supportive one of realistic encouragement.

In Saudi Arabia, trade and oil should dominate our foreign minister's talks. The future prospects for OPEC and its probable pricing and production policies should be near the top of the agenda there.

The Saudis' assessment of the Iran-Iraq war and future developments in that vital area could add greatly to Canada's knowledge of what to expect in the years to come. Similarly, the revival of Moslem fundamentalism — its strength, its goals — should be discussed with them.

Certainly in Egypt, Clark's third port of call, that subject will be on President Hosni Mubarak's mind if not his lips. Canada's role in Cairo cannot be a major one. But whatever we can do to promote a stable and prosperous Egypt is surely in our interest as well as that of the West in general.

One of the big disappointments in recent years has been the lack of enthusiasm and substance flowing from the Egypt-Israel peace treaty. Peace there is if that only means the absence of war. But peace there isn't if it was meant to mean active interaction between the two great neighbors po-

litically, diplomatically, in economic, cultural and touristic terms; in terms that the ordinary citizen of each country can understand and build upon.

It would be natural for Canada's representative to probe into that disappointment and to encourage the full unfolding of the almost moribund agreement that startled and excited the world only seven short years ago.

By this time Joe Clark will be full of facts, formulas and impressions as he enters Israel after visiting the Canadian forces in the Sinai. Fortunately Canada-Israel bilateral relations are good under the Conservatives. Clark will see both Prime Minister Peres and Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir. He can form his own impression of the viability of their government of national unity and what, if anything, will change when Shamir takes over from Peres next October.

Everywhere our team goes, terrorism must be discussed and, in particular, co-operation to end it. So should the problems of bleeding Lebanon, a country that so richly deserves peace and quiet to mend its fences and play its rightful role in an atmosphere of national reconciliation and future promise.

Clark has his hands full in this important mission. If he plays his cards right, he can add to Canada's reputation as one of the few friends of the region with no axe to grind and only peace to promote.