

Israeli peace plan a dead duck

Mideast peace plans are like clay pigeons in a shooting range. They are routinely lofted into the air and then blasted into smithereens.

The latest target for Mideast gunnery has been recently launched by Israel's crusty prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir. Its life expectancy should be short.

The Shamir plan calls for Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza to hold elections — under Israeli military supervision — to create something called a local leadership. Which, in turn, is supposed to negotiate something called local autonomy which, after five years or so, is to lead to something else that remains undefined.

What all this will definitely *not* lead to, grows Shamir, is a Palestinian state. Nor will there ever be any talks with the PLO. Take it or leave it, Shamir tells the Palestinians. And, adds Israel's tough Defence Minister Rabin, if you don't take it, there'll be no more Mr. Nice Guy. Get ready for a real crackdown.

Palestinians, to no one's surprise, have unanimously rejected the Shamir plan as a dangerous charade. They insist their sole representative remains the PLO. The U.S. has given the Shamir plan half-hearted approval.

Why, then, does Israel bother at all? For two reasons. First, because Israel is still hoping that it will somehow manage to create a local Palestinian leadership that will split with the PLO and shatter the unity of the uprising. Chances of this happening appear unlikely for now.

The second reason is more compelling. Washington, which gives Israel upward of US\$3 billion per annum, is most unhappy with Israel's right wing government. Recently, Secretary of State James Baker gave a startlingly frank speech to the powerful U.S. Israel lobby which caused seismic shocks all the way to Jerusalem. Israel, said Baker, must stop shooting and beat-



Eric

ARGOV'S

ing Palestinians and give them their human and political rights. The U.S. will not support the notion of greater Israel. Pull back from the West Bank and Gaza, urged Baker, and start reopening Palestinian schools which have been shut down by the military.

Shamir, not a man to be easily cowed, fired back that Baker's admonitions were "useless." Some of Shamir's more extreme supporters were again heard talking about mass expulsions as the only way to solve the Palestinian uprising.

In spite of Israel's hard line, there seems to be rising nervousness in Jerusalem, both over growing American pressure and the unexpected demonstration of Arab unity at last month's Casablanca summit. Israel can usually count on chronic disunity and backstabbing among the Arabs as its second most important ally after the U.S. For once, the squabbling Arabs got together and more or less backed the current PLO peace offensive. In spite of grumbling by Arab militants like Libya and Syria, the Arab states gave PLO chief Yasser Arafat a green light to pursue his offers to trade land for peace with Israel.

Most important, Egypt, the largest Arab nation, was finally readmitted as a member in good standing back

into the Arab assembly — in spite of its peace treaty with Israel. The Arabs, it seems, are taking a leaf from Mikhail Gorbachev's book by accepting the terms of their opponents. Never having expected that the Arabs would do this, Israel's right-wing government is reacting with a confusion and belligerent defiance that is further hurting its not very good image abroad.

In the midst of all this, a most interesting event occurred in Egypt that provoked little notice in the West. Egypt's leader, Husni Mubarak, dismissed Field Marshall Abu Ghazala as defence minister and kicked him upstairs into a powerless position. Abu Ghazala was the second most powerful man in Egypt and many Egyptians believed it would only be a matter of time before he would oust Mubarak and take over as strongman. The ex-defence minister also happened to be the CIA's most important asset within the Egyptian regime and a key source of U.S. influence over Egypt.

Firing Abu Ghazala may have been the price Mubarak had to pay to be accepted by his fellow Arabs. If so, this means Egypt has taken a big step away from American tutelage and back to a non-aligned role that it played before Anwar Sadat literally sold his country to the U.S. in exchange for US\$2.5 billion a year in aid and arms. It also suggests that unless Israel starts showing a more flexible attitude toward the Palestinians the peace treaty between Cairo and Jerusalem could begin to unravel.

At a time like this, Israel badly needs some artful diplomacy to at least give the appearance that it is interested in a realistic peace settlement even if it is not. Unfortunately, Shamir and his allies show little aptitude for such diplomatic finesse. Which suggests that once the latest sitting duck peace plan is blasted apart the Mideast's gunners may start aiming at each other.