

# Mideast peace mirage

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" The poet Yeats was referring to the Second Coming, of course, but his marvellous lines also seem just right to describe the long-awaited prospect of a Mideastern peace conference between Israel and its assorted Arab foes.

In spite of mounting media ballyhoo, I suspect that the loudly heralded meeting — if it ever takes place — will prove to be a resounding dud. Neither the U.S. nor Israel really wants a peace conference that will much alter the present status quo. They are merely going through the motions for the sake of public opinion.

The Israelis know that achieving any real peace agreement with the Arabs will mean relinquishing some or all of the West Bank, Golan, Gaza and a chunk of southern Lebanon. Something will also have to be done about the status of Jerusalem. To many Israelis, giving up strategic real estate in exchange for peace with Arab regimes that could change overnight is hardly an attractive risk.

Next comes the thorny question of the 4.7 million Palestinians clamoring for their own state on the West Bank and Gaza. By now it is patently clear that almost all Palestinians look to Yasser Arafat's PLO as their legitimate and chosen representatives. Dealing with the Palestinians must mean talking to the PLO, something Israel and the U.S. adamantly refuse to do.

Instead, Israel, the U.S. and their silent partner, Jordan, are feverishly trying to fashion some sort of non-PLO Palestinian "administration." This will serve as a fig leaf to conceal a planned Israeli-Jordanian condominium over the West Bank, com-

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plete with territorial nips and tucks designed to give the impression that land has been given back to Jordan. The increasingly militant Palestinians in the occupied territories will have nothing to do with what they will see as a Quisling regime. And it's hardly a secret that Jordan's King Hussein and his "moderate" Palestinian allies receive their monthly stipends from Langely, Va.

Even though this plan is clearly foredoomed, the U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz forges ahead with it, unchastened by his record of unbroken fiascoes in the Mideast. More U.S. billions will go into building houses of cards atop the shifting sands.

Then there is the question of Soviet participation in an international conference. Washington is loath to let the Soviets have any say in an area considered America's Raj. This is typical Shultz obtuseness. The Soviets, through their influence over Syria and the PLO, can wreck any agreement that they oppose.

Remember, too, that the West Bank is the same distance from the Soviet border as Mexico City is from San Antonio. Why should the Soviets not have a role in the conference that clearly affects their strategic and political interests? You can't make peace only with your friends.

Israel is now bitterly divided over whether to join even vague talks, not to mention real negotiations. The coalition government appears headed for collapse over this issue. Shimon Peres says he wants negotiations while Yitzhak Shamir thunders, "not one inch." For their part, the Arabs are even more divided. Some urge real negotiations, others are violently opposed. The Palestinians are equally split and fear being trapped into recognizing Israel and then shunted off with vague promises. They recall all the forgotten promises about West Bank autonomy in the Camp David accords.

In all, a pretty gloomy prospect. Even if talks do get under way, any of the Mideast's extremists, Arab or Israeli, could likely sabotage them by some calculated act of terror. Even while the mirage of peace floats in the Mideast air, Palestinian commando teams are trying to infiltrate Israel and the Israelis are busy bombing Palestinian camps. Just getting the talks under way will need a near miracle.

Only the U.S. can bring about such a miracle, and the greater one of producing an end to the 40 years of Arab-Israeli serial wars. But Washington lacks the will and guts to do so.

I don't think the Mideast players have the ability to make peace on their own. Worse, a failed conference will only worsen the hatreds and violence now seething in the Mideast, vindicating the views of the extremists on both sides. A tragedy for all concerned and more danger that Bethlehem could one day become another Sarajevo.

## Punch



"It's nothing short of a medical miracle! She came here mildly arthritic and walked away the winner of a multi-million-dollar malpractice judgment."