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Most dangerous game



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Spread across Thursday's News-Post front page was the latest promise from Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir to smash Palestinian hopes for a national homeland with "an iron fist." It would be difficult to count how many times since last November, when the intifadah (uprising) began, that threat has been made, and how often occupation authorities have announced peace had been restored to the troubled Holy Land.

Americans are in no position to carp at the Israelis' tendency to practice self-delusion on the Palestinian problem. As a people, we persist in creating illusions about the entire Middle East. Most of all, millions in this country wake up each morning with the hope that the entire region would have vanished in the night. Unfortunately, the same approach appears to afflict the powers-that-be in Washington.

U.S. policy-makers were caught flat-footed when King Hussein dealt himself out as the representative of the Palestinian people in negotiations governing their future. He was never "king of the Palestinians," but no more than their custodian, a role assumed by his grandfather in the wake of the 1948 wars. Dumping the people of the West Bank into King Abdullah's willing hands was but another way the world, including the other Arab nations, consigned them to the status of non-human beings. For his gain, the old king paid with his life at the hands of a Palestinian opposed to his foreign rule.

At best, Hussein was never more than the lesser of two evils in West Bank eyes, a convenience to serve the purpose of positioning Palestinians so that they might regain control over their own destiny. This hope was strengthened by the 1978 Camp David Accords, when agreement was reached that they were to regain some form of autonomy over the next five years.

Maybe not by accident, the intifadah began within days of the 10th anniversary of the celebration of President Sadat's historic voyage to Jerusalem. On that occasion, the Egyptian leader repeatedly stressed there could be no peace in the region without full recognition of Palestinian rights, including their own homeland.

In any event, the uprising, now in its ninth month, signalled, once and for all, that the Palestinians had made themselves responsible for their own fate. By their continuing willingness to die, they have affirmed their demands for self-determination. It is difficult to explain why Washington has paid no attention. But, until the king's announced withdrawal, Hussein was the prime support upon which U.S. plans for a "fair settlement" rested.

In truth, the United States finds itself in the quandary that the Jordanian king summed up as having "no policy" in the Middle East. There are those who have made that charge since the 1967 June War when America delegated intelligence and other functions of national

policy to the triumphant Israelis.

For most of that time, Washington was able to exercise control over "moderate" Arab states through its position as the sole supplier of their major weapons systems. However, increasingly in recent years, Britain and France have moved into a gap created by Congressional unwillingness to authorize White House arms shopping lists for Arab nations.

The timing could not have been worse from a U.S. point of view. For the restrictions grew tighter during the period when the Gulf nations, especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, were in great anxiety from a series of Iranian victories in the war with Iraq. Rebuffed by Congress, the Gulf rulers felt forced to fend for their own defenses. In the process, the Kuwaitis and Saudis set an example for Hussein. When Jordan's latest shopping list was tattered by U.S. politics, Britain returned to their former Amman stamping grounds.

However, his newly won freedom from dependency on America should not be overemphasized. In stepping out of the Palestinian muddle, King Hussein showed the talent for simply accepting a condition which could not be changed. A healthy dose of the same reality would do wonders for this country and Israel.

In the first place, the United States must learn that its closest ally in the Middle East is much further away these days, and growing more distant all the time. Prime Minister Shamir is guaranteed thunderous applause each speech he hauls out the line that this nation is "no banana republic," subservient to American wishes. The Israelis appear fiercely determined to push Washington into establishing its own independence, if only by default.

At the same time, Mr. Shamir and his associates should examine the record over the past eight-plus months. They will discover that every move they have attempted to repress the intifadah has only resulted in a new round of protests. In addition, using the Israeli Defense Force to subdue youths and girls has resulted, according to the Jerusalem Post, in further erosion of the once-proud aura of invincibility enjoyed by their armed forces. The erosion which began with the 1982 invasion of Lebanon constitutes a greater threat to Israel's future than all the stones thrown by Palestinians, so far and into the future.

Above all else, and in spite of any confusion in Washington, Jerusalem must find a way to make peace. The alternative is simply not acceptable. There are too many missiles and other new weapons rattling around the Middle East for anyone to count on a return to the past.

The simple truth jumps out: No one is in control in the Middle East. Each day the intifadah staggers on, mankind grows closer to World War III. To think otherwise is to play the most dangerous game of self-delusion since history began.