

November 27, 1992

CLASSIC GESTURES OF DISBELIEF

HERE is a characteristic Middle Eastern gesture: You place your finger on your cheekbone and pull the skin down gently. This widens the eye - and you present a good picture, comical and inoffensive, of disbelief, of skepticism. You are saying: "The story you are telling doesn't fool me" or "you know that I know that you're pulling my leg." Such a gesture is the appropriate response to the latest expression of Arab dissatisfaction with the progress of the "peace" talks in Washington.

Arab discontent and - more emphatically - threats to leave the negotiations are no more than hot air, poppycock designed to frighten the gullible Israeli negotiators. Though naturally the Arabs would have preferred greater progress toward their goal, they are, among themselves, experiencing an unprecedented euphoria. Some of them do at times forget themselves and give expression to praise of Rabin for the favorable note he has introduced into the "peace process," but their formidable propaganda machine repeats daily the formula that Israel has offered "nothing," or that what it has offered is "not enough," and it must make a serious proposal - or else mentality and self-hate) to see husks of half-built Jewish houses standing derelict in a Judean or Samarian village - at the order not of a MacDonaldd or a Chamberlain, but of a Rabin and a Ben-Eliezer.

The Arabs' manifest desire now is to "wait for Clinton." They are pretty nearly certain he will be on their side. Their belief is well-grounded in recent history. The names Carter and Bush instantly conjure up a memory of a close alliance with the Arabs - though in the Reagan administration as well, the weight of political support was with the Arabs.

The fact is that unless a US president has strong views of his own and a will strong enough to impose them, the State Department's policy will prevail, and the Department's policy toward Israel has been predominantly negative. This serves to emphasize the fatuity of Israeli governments' persistently treating the American administration as an "honest broker." The Labor government has now emphasized the American role as an active participant in the negotiations - which, it is now clear, are to remain permanently in Washington. US Ambassador William Harrop has forecast that President-elect Clinton's policy toward Israel will not differ from Bush's.

Nevertheless, activists in the cause of Israel here and in the US should not rush to prejudge that policy. They should make it their business to bring to Mr Clinton's notice the relevant facts - historical and geopolitical - about the conflict over Palestine, and the highly undesirable consequences that would result from the full implementation of extremely pro-Arab ideology of the Bush-Baker team.