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The Middle East

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Tension rose on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts during the past week as a result of the failure of Israeli and Egyptian representatives to reach agreement on the disengagement of their respective forces. Once again, the Israelis and their Arab adversaries appeared to be caught in an upward spiral of preparations for a possible resumption of hostilities. For the most part, however, both sides seemed to be trying to avoid actual armed encounters so as not to damage prospects for the start of the peace conference, now proposed for 18 December in Geneva. In preparation for that landmark event, Egyptian President Sadat gained wide support for the negotiations from the meeting of Arab leaders in Algiers this week, while Israel's Mrs. Meir won a vote of confidence from her party.

Debate on Disengagement

Military representatives of Egypt and Israel met five times between 22 and 29 November, but were unable to reconcile their respective proposals on disengagement. Since its initial suggestion of a mutual pullback to opposite sides of the Suez Canal was rejected, Israel has concentrated on its proposal to withdraw from both banks to a line approximately ten kilometers east of the canal. Tel Aviv has conditioned this offer, however, on a severe thinning out of Egyptian forces on the east bank—a move Cairo considers too damaging to the military credibility it established in the recent fighting. The Egyptians, for their part, have put forth equally unacceptable proposals calling for a more extensive Israeli withdrawal from the canal to a line east of the strategic Sinai passes, which would thus pass from Israeli control. As of noon Thursday, the two sides seemed within range of a compromise on the location of a disengagement line, but Israel's requirement that Egypt station only "policing" and not military forces on the east bank remained a major sticking point.

The Egyptians have become increasingly concerned that Israel is merely stalling. Cairo

views the six-point accord arranged last month by Secretary Kissinger as a package that must be implemented as a whole, not selectively. Point two of the package, in the Egyptian interpretation, requires some tangible Israeli withdrawal, sooner rather than later. The Egyptians are ready to skirt the controversial question of a pullback to the cease-fire lines of 22 October, if this will produce a wider disengagement, but they view protracted haggling on the specifics of disengagement as an Israeli attempt to delay withdrawing at all.

Israeli officials have suggested that the question may have to be held over to the formal peace conference. Egyptian officials have interpreted this as confirmation of Israeli stalling tactics. They have indicated that as far as Cairo is concerned, agreement on some withdrawal might become a prerequisite for convening the conference.

The question of the 127 Israeli prisoners that Tel Aviv claims are in Syrian hands also remains stalemated. The Syrians have tied an exchange of prisoners to progress toward an Israeli withdrawal from Syrian territory; Israeli officials have generally taken the line that the two issues are not related, but that a peace conference could be held up by a refusal to return the prisoners. Mrs. Meir, however, offered this week to give up two fortified positions on Mount Hermon in return for the prisoners. Syria has not reacted officially.

Some progress may have been made on one of the unspoken "understandings" that accompanied the six-point accord. Without being specific, Israel's Trade and Industry Minister Bar Lev indicated on 26 November that Egypt may have lifted its blockade at the Strait of Bab al-Mandab at the entrance to the Red Sea. Asked at a press conference about the status of the

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blockade, Bar Lev replied that, "as far as we know," the cease-fire is being observed on land, air, and sea.

Alarms and Alerts

The diplomatic impasse has led to renewed talk of war on all sides, with each claiming to see the other making preparations. Egyptian forces on the east bank of the canal and on the perimeter of Israel's west bank salient were apparently reinforced again late last week.

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The Israelis themselves are on heightened alert on both fronts, as well as along their border with Jordan—a potential third front. There have been indications that some reserves were again mobilized late last week.

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Israeli officials continue to talk publicly of Israel's readiness for renewed warfare. Defense Minister Dayan recently claimed that Israel is just at the beginning, not at the end, of war with Egypt and Syria.

ISRAEL

Tel Aviv has agreed to attend the inaugural session of talks on an Arab-Israeli peace settlement next month. It has reiterated, however, that it cannot make any substantive commitments prior to parliamentary elections on 31 December. In general, the Israelis feel themselves sliding into

THE UN PEACE-KEEPING FORCE

Less than half of the planned 7,000-man UN peace-keeping force is actually in Egypt, and its effectiveness remains limited. This week, however, several steps were taken that could speed up the arrival of the remaining personnel that have been committed and hasten the flow of essential supplies.

The General Assembly's Finance Committee approved plans for a special assessment of UN members to pay for the force. The approved scale of assessment—which the assembly is expected to levy next week—will place the major burden on the developed states, particularly the US, Soviet Union, France, and the UK. China, which has announced that it will not contribute, did not participate in the vote. In addition, the Security Council agreed to add Kenya and Senegal to the eleven states at present providing troops for the force. These additions should bring the total number of troops close to the authorized ceiling.

Canada and Poland also reached agreement this week on dividing the responsibilities in their joint logistic unit. Their protracted negotiations over the unit's organization had delayed badly needed transportation and support facilities.

the talks at a distinct disadvantage. They are clearly anxious about US intentions and are well aware of the effective leverage that the Arabs have gained on the West by their oil restrictions.

A variety of views are coming out of Israel, but they boil down to two basic themes: one, a hope for peace; the other, deep doubts that it can be achieved on a basis that gives Israelis a sense of security. Foreign Minister Eban, for example, saw both "dangers and opportunities" in the talks; he re-emphasized the hope that Israel could bank on firm US support. Prime Minister Meir, commenting on peace prospects, indicated that the signs she saw "were not too encouraging." [Redacted]

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[redacted] she was most despondent over the "complete isolation" of her country; she said she was "forever" indebted to the US for its help, but that she would welcome the re-establishment of relations with Moscow.

The impending peace conference and Israeli parliamentary elections prompted some unusually tough talk from Defense Minister Dayan this week. A week ago, Dayan was philosophically urging Israelis to face up to the "new reality," and to curry strong US support. This week—perhaps in part to take some of the domestic political heat off the government and himself—he stated flatly that Israel was "not about to become the victim of unsafe borders, just because some people need oil."

Dayan expressed new doubt that the Arabs really wanted peace, and urged Israel—"even if Americans think differently"—to hold fast to the Golan Heights, the high ground over Jordan's West Bank, and Sharm ash Shaykh at the tip of the Sinai. He reiterated that Israel should reject withdrawal to the borders it had before June 1967, even if these were internationally guaranteed. Such guarantees, he said, should complement defensible borders, not supplant them. Dayan is due in Washington next week and undoubtedly will press these views on US officials.

Deputy Prime Minister Allon, on the other hand, has urged a "fair" territorial compromise. He indicated that he personally could accept border changes if they were accompanied by large demilitarized zones. He said Israel should make every effort, including "painful" compromises, to achieve a peace settlement. Renewed war, he thought, would put an end to the chances for a settlement.

Debate in the Labor Party

Elements within Mrs. Meir's Labor Party are pressing for a softer Israeli stance. These are the so-called doves, most obviously younger elements and intellectuals, but probably also such important figures as Foreign Minister Eban and party boss and Finance Minister Sapir. The dissidents

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At a meeting of the party's central committee on 28 November, the dissidents' bid to reopen the candidates' list was turned back by a wide margin. The vote, in effect, reconfirmed Mrs. Meir as party leader, at least until after the elections, and left Dayan on the list. It was agreed that changes would be made in the platform "to adapt it to the new reality." The top leaders have already drafted the new version, which is to be presented later to the central committee.

The somewhat softened platform stresses that Israel's "central aim" is to achieve peace and describes the coming talks as the "most valuable event in the history of the Middle East." It also stresses that the peace must be negotiated "without pressure" or preconditions, and that Israel expects, in the wake of a settlement, a new era of "normal relations." It avoids mention of the 51 Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, and emphasizes both "territorial compromise" and preservation of the Jewish character of Israel—a formulation that in effect renounces any intention to hold permanently any areas with large Arab populations.

With these concessions to the doves, the revised platform then reverts to some long-standing Israeli tenets that are in fundamental opposition to Arab aims:

- Israel must have defensible borders;
- it will not return to the lines that existed prior to the June 1967 war;
- Jerusalem will remain united and under Israeli control;
- Israel is opposed to a separate, independent Palestinian state on Jordan's West Bank.

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This contention within the Labor Party reflects a country-wide pre-election debate regarding the government's past policies and the course Israel should follow now. At present, there is strong sentiment for Israel to make a genuine effort to obtain a peace settlement or at least to find out, once and for all, if the Arabs most directly concerned are sincere in their professed willingness to accept an Israeli state in their midst.

Arab Summitry

With neither the Libyans nor the Iraqis on hand to act as spoilers, other top Arab leaders ended three days of talks in Algiers on Wednesday on a buoyant note, reaffirming the unprecedented degree of Arab solidarity achieved as a result of the October war. The only known wrangling occurred over the Palestinian issue. In the end, the conferees almost unanimously decided to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization as the sole legitimate spokesman for the Palestinian people, despite King Husayn's threat to boycott the Geneva peace conference if they did so.

President Sadat—with the aid of King Faysal, President Asad, and others—apparently obtained the mixture of vague, flexible resolutions he hoped for, implicitly supporting his decision to

negotiate with the Israelis. After the final session, the Arabs issued their standard call for the immediate withdrawal of the Israelis from all occupied Arab territory and for the restoration of the "national rights" of the Palestinians. The declaration warned that unless these two conditions were met, there could be no peace. In their closing remarks, both Sadat and Asad stressed the need for continued Arab unity. Sadat also touched on the possibility of renewed fighting, but reportedly declared that war was not the answer to the situation and that the Arabs were now on the right path.

Arab League Secretary General Mahmud Riad told the press that the Arabs would continue to use oil as a political weapon and that the ministerial committee of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries would review the situation periodically to determine which countries would receive oil. Because of their shift to a more pro-Arab line, Riad said that Japan and the Philippines would be exempted, along with most West European countries, from the 5-percent cutback scheduled for December. As a gesture of thanks to the black African states that broke diplomatic relations with Israel, the summit agreed to make sure they receive an adequate supply of oil and to embargo the flow of

Empty Libyan and Iraqi seats at Arab Conference



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Arab oil to South Africa, Rhodesia, and Portugal. The Arabs also promised to sever any diplomatic and economic ties with those countries.

Husayn and the Palestinians

The summit decision to back the Palestine Liberation Organization's claim to represent the Palestinians poses a serious dilemma for Jordan's King Husayn. Although he flatly stated that he would not attend the peace talks if the summit took this step, he clearly does not want to abdicate to the fedayeen his claim to sovereignty over Jordan's West Bank, occupied by Israel since 1967.

The Palestine Liberation Organization reportedly has indicated that it is willing to reach an understanding with Husayn only if he recognizes the fedayeen organization as the sole legitimate spokesman for Palestinians and allows the fedayeen to re-establish a military and political presence in Jordan. In addition, fedayeen leader Yasir Arafat told *Al Ahram* this week that any declaration of a government-in-exile was "premature" and that a decision on whether the fedayeen would attend the peace talks was being held in abeyance, apparently until an invitation is received.

THE SOVIETS KEEP ACTIVE

Moscow is still trying to get back into the mainstream of Middle East developments. A few days after Yasir Arafat and other fedayeen leaders ended their visit to Moscow on 24 November, several high-ranking Soviet party officials were sent to Baghdad and Cairo.

The Arafat visit was handled in a low key. The Soviets waited until two days after the dele-

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gation had left to acknowledge the visit and then stressed its "unofficial" nature. If any specific Soviet commitments were made, they were not publicized, although Moscow again endorsed the "legitimate national rights" of the Palestinians.

Nevertheless, Soviet leaders have made it clear that the problem of the Palestinians must be treated at a peace conference. The cautious handling of the Arafat delegation probably indicates that Moscow will reserve its position until the Palestinians and the Arab governments have worked out their own policy on this complex issue.

Meanwhile, the Soviets are pressing for full implementation of the cease-fire agreement, including the pull-back of troops to the lines of 22 October. On the scene, a portion of the 36-man Soviet contribution to the corps of UN truce observers has been integrated into operations in Egypt. The remainder will join UN teams in Syria and Lebanon.

Moscow's interest in getting a peace conference under way quickly was a central theme in the comments made by Foreign Minister Gromyko during recent talks with Canadian Foreign Minister Sharp. Gromyko said the conference should begin by mid-December and, while taking a tough line on Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories, left open a number of possibilities for guaranteeing Israeli borders. He suggested that the Great Powers, the Security Council, or both, might be responsible for the guarantees and argued that if the Security Council were involved, a way could be found to avoid having decisions hamstrung by the veto.

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