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THE MIDDLE EAST

IN ISRAEL: A SHIFT TO THE RIGHT

2 [The parliamentary elections on December 31 resulted in a shift to the right that weakened Prime Minister Meir's Labor Alignment but left it the strongest party in the Knesset. The Alignment will almost certainly be the core of the next government, which will be a coalition as have been all previous Israeli governments.]

1 [Final results are not yet available, but the Alignment so far has received about 42 percent of the vote and appears to have lost six of its 57 Knesset seats. The National Religious Party, the Alignment's major coalition partner in the old government, lost one of its 12 seats. As of noon Thursday, the Alignment-led coalition that has governed since the 1969 elections appeared to have lost eight of the 77 seats it controlled in the 120-member Knesset. Twenty-one parties vied for seats, with ten parties having so far received at least the minimum 1 percent of the vote required for representation in parliament.]

1 [As anticipated, the rightist opposition group, Likud, made substantial gains, receiving just over

27 percent of the vote and increasing its strength from 31 to 38 seats, according to incomplete returns. Its leader, Menahem Begin, claimed at a post-election rally that Likud's strong showing demonstrated to all the world that Israelis reject any concessions that would result in a "repartition of the land of Israel," meaning primarily a return of the occupied West Bank to the Arabs.]

2 [Attempts by Mrs. Meir to form a new Alignment-led government coalition are expected to be difficult and protracted, but eventually successful. The National Religious Party, more sympathetic to Likud's hard-line position on the territorial question, will undoubtedly see the Alignment's poor electoral showing as enhancing the Religious Party's ability to wring concessions from Mrs. Meir in return for continued participation in the coalition. The Alignment's strategy, while based on maintaining the old coalition, will also include attempts to induce more moderate opposition elements, especially some within Likud, to come over to its side. It seems likely, however, that no matter what coalition eventually

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Listening to the election returns in Israel

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emerges, Tel Aviv's flexibility will be impaired in negotiating with the Arabs.]

1 [Municipal elections held concurrently with the national balloting also reflected a shift away from the Alignment toward more conservative parties. In Jerusalem, for example, the Alignment lost its absolute majority on the municipal council, although it still remained the strongest party.]

1,2 [Arab voters stayed away from the polls in droves, partly as a result of threats from Palestinian guerrillas and calls by Egyptian and Jordanian media for a boycott. Many of those who did vote reflected the rise in Arab nationalist sentiment that has occurred since the recent war by switching their support to Rakah, the Arab Communist Party, which has long espoused the Arab cause. These additions helped Rakah gain a fourth Knesset seat. In the Jerusalem elections, only 11 percent of the city's eligible Arab voters cast their ballots.]

IN GENEVA: LOOKING FOR PROGRESS

2 [With the Israeli election now completed, Egypt will look for quick progress toward a disengagement of forces along the Suez Canal. Cairo wants this both to satisfy its own need for an Israeli withdrawal and to serve as a salutary example, for the benefit of doubting Syrians, of the wisdom of the decision to proceed with negotiations. Although content to let the initial sessions of the military talks in Geneva proceed slowly in anticipation of the election, Cairo is unlikely to view the process of governmental reorganization in Israel as sufficient reason for further postponement of an agreement on disengagement.]

1 [The Egyptians used the slow start of the talks to advantage, attempting to pin down the basic principles that will govern disengagement before turning to the specifics of territorial delineation. This is undoubtedly an effort to establish clear guidelines for the talks in order to prevent some of the inconclusive haggling that marred and

ultimately caused the breakdown of the Kilometer 101 talks.]

1,2 [Egyptian and Israeli military negotiators apparently reached general agreement on some of their respective negotiating principles at the first three sessions on December 26 and 28 and January 2. There remains, however, a major divergence of view on at least one Israeli principle, that of "mutuality." Tel Aviv insists that any Israeli withdrawal under a disengagement formula be accompanied by a reciprocal Egyptian withdrawal, while Cairo is equally insistent that the territory it has retaken on the canal's east bank remain under its full military control.]

IN EGYPT

1,2 [Cairo media commentary on the Israeli election, although thus far sparse, has reflected misgivings that right-wing gains will in fact lead to Israeli procrastination. Cairo's message is clear: that the Egyptians cannot tolerate further dallying and have the military strength necessary to achieve Egypt's goals forcibly if this cannot be accomplished through negotiation.] [Although the Egyptians have not, in public commentary, tied the election question directly to the disengagement talks, the media's constant reminders that Egypt has a force to be reckoned with on the canal's east bank are an indication that Cairo does not intend to relinquish that bridgehead.]

ALONG THE FRONTS

1 [Heavy artillery fire erupted along the Suez front on January 2 after several days of relative quiet. The firing took place throughout the day and apparently was more intensive than previous sporadic incidents. Eight Israeli soldiers were wounded in the shelling. It was not clear which side began the shooting, but harassing artillery fire provides Cairo with a means of pressuring Tel Aviv and keeping world attention on the battlefield. Artillery fire also was exchanged on the Syrian front and three Israelis reportedly were killed there.
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