

Middle East

EGYPT-ISRAEL

The summit meeting in Ismailia on 25 and 26 December was less successful than Egyptian President Sadat had hoped, but both he and Israeli Prime Minister Begin have been upbeat in their appraisal of the meeting. The two leaders say they are optimistic that there will be further progress by the military and political committees that are scheduled to meet next month at the ministerial level.

Sadat was unable to get agreement on a "declaration of principles," for which he had been holding out hope right up to the beginning of the meeting. The most serious disagreements were over the future of the West Bank and the Palestinian Arabs, which Sadat described as the "crux of the whole problem." The question of an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai appears less intractable, although many details are yet to be worked out.

Sadat's failure to achieve a breakthrough on the West Bank and Palestinian issues opens him to more criticism from Arab rejectionists, and complicates his efforts to secure the endorsement of key Arab moderates. [redacted]

[redacted] widespread disappointment among Egyptians, and [redacted]

Sadat will have problems keeping up the morale of his supporters as Egypt and Israel enter into detailed ministerial negotiations.

US and UN representatives will be invited to take part in the political committee sessions, which will be held in Jerusalem at the foreign minister level. Egypt will be represented by its newly named Foreign Minister, Muhammad Ibrahim Kamil, whose ties with Sadat reportedly date back to the mid-1940s.

The bilateral military committee, led by the Israeli and Egyptian Defense Ministers, will meet in Cairo. Begin indicated



President Sadat (1) responds to Prime Minister Begin

that the committees' negotiations will probably last for a number of months.

The Israeli View

In a lengthy cabinet session on 27 December and in a Knesset speech the following day, Begin strongly defended his government's position. In the Knesset speech he took an especially tough line on the West Bank, insisting that his proposal for local self-rule offered the "only possible way" to resolve conflicting claims to the disputed area.

He warned that no agreement is possible if the West Bank problem remained unsettled. By raising the specter of failure, he seemed to be both defending the need for Israeli concessions and cautioning Sadat that Egypt would need to show more flexibility on the Palestinian question.

By characterizing his West Bank proposal as an interim solution, however, Begin may believe he has left an opening for finessing the thorny problem of the West Bank's ultimate disposition in the current round of negotiations.

Begin still enjoys broad political and public support for his peace efforts. Although many members of his own Likud bloc are uneasy over the extent of his willingness to compromise, the Likud faction in the Knesset has endorsed the government's proposals by a wide margin, reportedly after stormy debate.

Despite sharp attacks from Labor Party hawks worried about the future status of Labor-affiliated settlements in the occupied territories, Labor Party leader Peres has soft-pedaled his criticism of Begin's proposals. In response to the Begin speech, he offered qualified support for the

government's peace policy and praised the Prime Minister for his ability to revise long-held assumptions and make difficult decisions.

Jordanian and Saudi Arabian Response

The Jordanian Government has rejected the plan Begin has outlined for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as little more than an attempt to retain control over those areas while appearing to be flexible. The Amman press is sharply critical of the failure of the Ismailia summit to resolve the West Bank issue, but blames Israel while carefully avoiding direct criticism of President Sadat. King Husayn has been privately supportive of Sadat's initiatives and has expressed a desire to join the negotiations at some later date. Sadat's apparent failure to get any meaningful concessions on the West Bank, however, will probably make the King far more cautious about associating himself with the Egyptian leader's initiatives.

Saudi Arabia has been noncommittal on the latest Sadat-Begin talks. The Saudis showed tacit support by allowing extensive media coverage of the event, but they are clearly unimpressed by Begin's proposals. Some senior Saudi leaders probably see the summit's meager results as confirmation of their view that Sadat is on the wrong track. Others undoubtedly still hope that the process set in motion by Sadat's visit to Jerusalem may ultimately pay off in a comprehensive Middle East peace.

Syrian Treatment

Damascus is taking considerable satisfaction in what it views as the failure of the

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Ismailia meeting. [redacted]

[redacted] Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister was ebullient over the "evidence of the impasse" he said had developed as a result of the Ismailia meeting.

President Asad, who has been unable so far to persuade any of the moderate Arab heads of state to side with him in opposing Sadat's moves, probably hopes for a stalemate in the Egyptian-Israeli talks that would vindicate Syrian opposition.

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The Syrian media continue their harsh editorial attacks on the "traitor" Sadat, with one leading newspaper contending that Sadat is likely to continue the talks with Begin simply to hide the lack of progress.

Palestinian Reaction

Following the Syrian lead, the Palestine Liberation Organization has continued its criticism of the talks despite Sadat's insistence on further Israeli concessions regarding the Palestinians and the West Bank. On 26 December the PLO Executive Committee issued a statement characterizing the Begin-Sadat statements as a betrayal of the rights of the Palestinian people.

During a visit to Yugoslavia the next day, PLO chief Yasir Arafat criticized alleged attempts to impose a US-Israeli solution on the area. As he has in the past, however, Arafat avoided personal attacks on Sadat himself, suggesting that he is still keeping tenuous lines open to the Egyptians.

At the same time, the Palestinians are raising the specter of further military or terrorist operations should the PLO be ignored in any settlement. They also continue to warn West Bank Palestinians against cooperating with Egyptian or Israeli negotiators. The PLO's official news agency has indicated that the killing of a West Bank Palestinian on 26 December had been ordered because he had collaborated with Israeli officials.

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