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EGYPT-ISRAEL

Egyptian and Israeli negotiators began this week to discuss in detail the thorny issues they must resolve if Egyptian President Sadat's peace initiative is to succeed.

An Israeli delegation headed by Defense Minister Weizman arrived in Cairo on 11 January to meet with Egyptian counterparts in the first session of a joint military committee, one of two such working groups agreed to at the Ismailia summit between Sadat and Prime Minister Begin. A political committee, with Foreign Ministers Dayan and Kamil heading their respective countries' delegations and attended by Secretary Vance, convenes in Jerusalem on 16 January.

The military committee will be the principal forum for resolving bilateral problems, while the political committee takes up broader Arab-Israeli issues. Among the matters on which the military conferees must agree are the extent and timing of Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai, the designation of limited-armament and demilitarized zones, the status of Israeli airfields in the Sinai, and arrangements that will protect Israel's security.

They will also consider the disposition of Jewish settlements in the Sinai—an issue that has sparked fresh controversy in recent days and may prove to be the most difficult item before the committee. With both sides still far apart on some aspects of an agreement, weeks of hard bargaining lie ahead.

The issues before the political committee are, if anything, more difficult. They include the question that was primarily responsible for the deadlock at Ismailia—the future of the Palestinians. The dele-

gates will also try to reach agreement on the nature of Arab-Israeli peace accords, and they too will have to deal with the Israeli settlements—not only in the Sinai but also on the West Bank of the Jordan River and in the Golan Heights.

Begin and the Settlements

Begin still enjoys broad support in Israel for his peace proposals, but a small, vocal minority is having some success in exploiting widespread concern over various aspects of the plan. Begin's efforts to blunt this opposition by taking a hard line on retention of settlements in the Sinai only served to encourage his critics, who hope to reduce his room for maneuver.

Within the cabinet, Agriculture Minister Sharon, the arch-hawk in charge of the government's program on settlements, is the key opponent of further concessions to Egypt. Sharon suffered a setback, however, when the cabinet on 8 January rejected his plan to create additional settlements in the Sinai in favor of "thickening" those already in existence.

In approving this half-measure, Begin and most of the cabinet hoped to deflect charges that the government plans to abandon the settlements and to avoid poisoning the atmosphere of the Egyptian-Israeli talks. The cabinet also voted down a proposal to include Sharon in Israel's delegation to the political committee.

Egyptian Reaction

Although much of Begin's maneuvering is dictated by domestic political considerations, Egyptian officials worry that the stands he has taken show too little willingness to run risks for peace. They believe he is politically strong enough to show more flexibility and suspect he is trying to slow the pace of negotiations.

Sadat remains optimistic that the political committee can come up with a formulation on the broader Arab-Israeli issues that will allow him to make peace with Israel as part of a comprehensive, rather than bilateral, settlement. So far, he has retained the strong domestic support he has enjoyed since launching his initiative.

Other Arabs

Algerian President Boumediene ended a week of visits to Arab capitals and went to Moscow on 12 January for talks related to Middle Eastern developments. While in Arabian Peninsula capitals and in Amman, he apparently sought to convince moderate Arabs of the dangers associated with Sadat's peace initiatives. There is no evidence that he swung any of them away from their public wait-and-see posture.

In Damascus and Baghdad, on the other hand, Boumediene has probably been exploring ways to reconcile the two rival Baathist regimes, as well as trying to arrange an Arab summit. During a second stopover in Damascus, Boumediene dispatched his Foreign Minister to Baghdad on 11 January with a message to the Iraqi leaders. This quick visit was seen by some observers as indicating movement toward a reconciliation between Syria and Iraq, on which there has been much speculation in the Arab media but no hard information.

Sadat would like to draw Jordan into the negotiations at some point. King Husayn, however, is holding to his position that he cannot unilaterally repudiate the declaration of the 1974 Arab summit in Rabat that the Palestine Liberation Organization is the sole representative of the Palestinians, including those in former Jordanian territory on the West Bank.

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