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# MIDDLE EAST

## NEGOTIATIONS BEGIN

(NO SOURCES)

The Egyptians and Israelis began disengagement talks in Geneva this week. Representatives of the two sides met for the first time on December 26 in a military working group created at the two-day opening session of the peace conference, which convened on December 21. The group is scheduled to meet again on December 28, but little progress is expected pending the outcome of Israeli elections early next week.

Damascus probably could resume hostilities with little additional preparation, as Syrian military forces are as strong now in both equipment and manpower as they were prior to the October war. Syria has stepped up its military training, and most Syrian ground force units probably have been reconstituted. The Israelis are aware that Damascus has taken a number of steps to put its civilian population and military forces on a war-time footing.

Cease-fire violations recorded this week were limited primarily to exchanges of small-arms fire, but military tensions continue unabated despite the beginning of negotiations in Geneva. The Egyptian media—perhaps in an effort to keep the pressure on Israel to enter into serious bargaining—early this week reported “severe battles” involving exchanges of artillery, mortar, and tank fire.

The number of violations on the Syrian front has diminished somewhat, although Israeli and Syrian forces remain on high alert.

## Egyptian Reaction

Skepticism by Cairo's media over developments at Geneva, although deliberately overdrawn, probably reflects genuine misgivings among the Egyptian leaders. *Al-Ahram* noted in a weekend editorial that the conference has not yet moved beyond the disengagement talks that stalled last month at Kilometer 101. The newspaper also chided the US for not attending the new disengagement discussions and charged Washington with abdicating responsibility for ensuring

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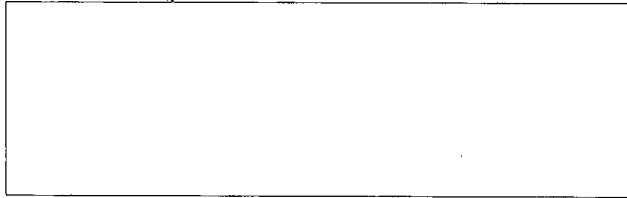
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(NO SOURCES)

that the talks achieve rapid progress. The editorials reflect Cairo's usual fears that Israel, without continuous and direct outside pressures, will drag its feet on Arab demands for progress.

Cairo media are also emphasizing that Egypt is going to Geneva under the mandate granted it by the Arab leaders at their Algiers summit in late November, and that it is determined to adhere with "utter seriousness" to the summit's demands for a total Israeli withdrawal and a restoration of Palestinian rights. Foreign Minister Fahmi has been instructed, according to *Al Ahrām*, to make it clear that Egypt is seeking an Arab—not merely an Egyptian—solution and that Cairo is equally concerned for Syrian territory and for the Sinai. Without Syria's presence and its support, Egypt is particularly sensitive about its image at the conference and probably worries that pressures from other Arabs to break off the talks will intensify unless its decision to negotiate is justified.



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**Syria Still Holding Back**

Syria continues to justify its refusal to attend the conference by characterizing it as nothing more than an extension of the Kilometer 101 talks on troop disengagement in the Sinai. Although Damascus radio has left the way open for Syria to attend at a later stage, it still insists that Israel must first begin to withdraw from occupied Arab territories and agree to safeguard "the national rights of the Palestinian people."

**Saudi Reaction**

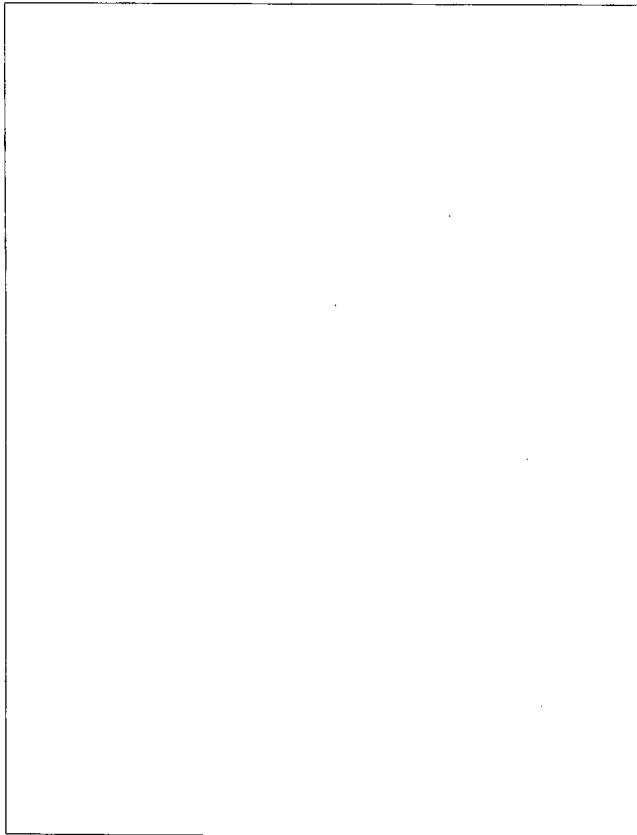
Saudi Arabia's tightly controlled press has taken a generally pessimistic view of the proceedings in Geneva. *Al Ukaz* contrasted Secretary Kissinger's expressions of optimism with Mrs. Meir's statements that "reiterate the Israeli position since 1967." The newspaper saw some chance for progress, but pointed out that this depends on Tel Aviv's readiness to withdraw from Israeli-occupied territories in accordance with UN resolutions.

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**Israeli Position**

After attending the opening session of the conference, Foreign Minister Eban returned to Israel cautiously optimistic about prospects. He warned, however, that the conference would be lengthy. Prime Minister Meir has reiterated that a successful conclusion can be attained only if Israel's right to exist is acknowledged by the Arabs. She made it clear that although Israel is prepared to compromise on the issue of its eventual borders, it is not willing to return to those of 1967, as the Arabs are demanding. Mrs. Meir stressed that international guarantees cannot replace defensible borders.

Israel's chief negotiator at the talks at Kilometer 101, Major General Yariv, told a reporter



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(NO SOURCES)

recently that there was a sizable gap between the negotiating positions of the two sides when those talks broke off. He foresaw very difficult discussions at Geneva but said it may be possible to reach an agreement on disengagement because Cairo has a particular interest in getting the Israelis to evacuate their salient on the west bank of the Suez Canal. Defense Minister Dayan told journalists that he believes the chances for success at the disengagement talks are better than even, but warned that Israel could not accept a plan that failed to provide solid provisions against renewed fighting. In any case, the Israelis view the December Geneva sessions primarily as a holding action pending the outcome of next week's parliamentary elections and the formation of a new government.

#### Moscow Takes Upbeat View of Geneva

The Soviets have taken an optimistic view of the initial sessions in Geneva. Foreign Minister Gromyko said he was leaving Geneva "with a feeling of satisfaction," and the Soviet press hailed the "businesslike and constructive character" of the conference as a "great achievement." By such positive treatment, Moscow is seeking to maintain the momentum of the talks. The Soviets had apparently been concerned that Egypt would balk at continuing if progress was not made in the initial round. In addition, the Soviets want to rebuke Syria and other Arab states who have attacked the conclave.

In his speech to the conference, Foreign Minister Gromyko predictably placed on Israel the burden for securing a settlement. Gromyko avoided stridency, however, and struck some positive notes. He soft-pedaled the Palestinian problem and implied Soviet willingness to restore diplomatic relations with Israel as part of a settlement. Gromyko also provided the first authoritative public Soviet endorsement for "reciprocal" demilitarized zones in "certain sectors," endorsed "temporary" deployment of "international personnel" to police a settlement, and restated Soviet willingness to make "appropriate commitments" to guarantee an accord. [REDACTED]

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#### ISRAEL: ELECTION PROSPECTS

(NO SOURCES)

Mrs. Meir's Labor Alignment is expected to emerge from the balloting on December 31 strong enough to form another coalition government, according to the US Embassy in Tel Aviv. The embassy also reports, however, that there is some discussion in Israel that Mrs. Meir's coalition partners may balk at rejoining a government under her leadership, particularly if Israel appears too concession-minded at Geneva. The embassy is reasonably certain that if such difficulties arise, they could be overcome without forcing a second election.

The opposition parties, led by the right-wing Likud group, have seized as election issues:

- the government's handling of the war and the economy;
- its inability to secure the release of Israeli POWs held by Syria;
- its alleged bowing to US pressure to negotiate;
- its willingness to make concessions at the peace talks.

The opposition's tactics may have had some effect. According to press accounts, recent Israeli polls show that about one third of the country's approximately two million voters—more than in any previous election—are still undecided. Mrs. Meir's Labor Alignment, on the other hand, feels there is a strong undercurrent in Israel for a settlement. It is attempting to capitalize on this by assuming the mantle of the peace party and trying to characterize Likud as a party of inflexible war-hawks. A strong showing for Likud—although unexpected—would seriously limit or even negate Tel Aviv's ability to negotiate. [REDACTED]

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