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THE MIDDLE EAST

THE EFFECTS OF DISENGAGEMENT

In Egypt

1,5 Throughout Secretary Kissinger's week of negotiations, the Cairo press has sounded an optimistic note about prospects for a satisfactory disengagement agreement. The agreement announced on January 17 will now allow the resumption of domestic and diplomatic activity that had been held in abeyance while the extended negotiations proceeded. President Sadat, for instance, has apparently been awaiting the conclusion of this round of negotiations before moving ahead with an impending cabinet reorganization, and Foreign Minister Fahmi has had to postpone a trip to Moscow originally scheduled to begin last weekend.

5 Sadat may now also visit several neighboring states in an effort to bring other Arab leaders up to date on the status of negotiations and, more importantly, to coordinate the next round with Syria. Press sources have indicated that Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait will be on Sadat's itinerary, and President Bourguiba has told the US Embassy that Tunisia will be included as well.

In Syria

4 Syria threatened to sever diplomatic relations with Cairo on Thursday after the announcement of the Israeli-Egyptian disengagement agreement, according to a press report from Damascus. If the report is true, it indicates President Asad was pulled up short by hard-liners in the military and Baath party who strongly oppose negotiations with Israel.

Asad's own position may have been seriously weakened by this turn of events. Only a few days ago, the Syrian President seemed ready to enter negotiations. Asad was said to have told a special conclave of Syrian political party leaders that Syria would attend the Geneva conference. To underscore the decision, he reportedly named the delegation and said he intended to reshuffle the cabinet. Most prominent among those who had been rumored for replacement was Foreign Minister Khaddam, a hard-liner who reportedly had threatened to resign rather than represent Syria at the peace talks.

In Israel

10 Mrs. Meir's caretaker government came under stronger attack from domestic critics for

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what they saw as its readiness to make unilateral concessions in the negotiations with Egypt.

The rightist Likud bloc, emboldened by its recent electoral gains, charged the government with conducting the talks through Secretary Kissinger as if Israel had no choice but to "surrender in stages." Likud claimed the talks were leading only to a unilateral withdrawal endangering Israeli security, and demanded that the agenda for the opening session of the newly elected Knesset on January 21 include a discussion of the government's proposals. Mrs. Meir agreed on January 16 to make a statement to the Knesset on the separation of forces negotiations and on the country's security condition.

The Israeli press, too, expressed misgivings, alleging that even US security guarantees might be insufficient to compensate Tel Aviv for withdrawing from the Suez Canal without an agreement from Cairo to thin its forces on the canal's east bank.

Meanwhile, efforts to form a new coalition government moved ahead. According to press reports, Prime Minister Meir's Labor Alignment hopes to conclude the negotiations by the end of next week. The major stumbling block apparently is reconciling the divergent views on religious matters held by the Alignment's prospective coalition partners—the religious parties and the liberals—rather than the peace negotiations with the Arabs.

The Alignment gained a measure of additional weight in the complex Israeli political equation when two Arab parties that had previously been only affiliated with the Alignment formally merged with it. Although these parties would have continued in the coalition, their entry raises the Alignment's Knesset total to 54 compared with 39 for the opposition Likud bloc.

In addition, three Knesset members who were elected under the Civil Rights list have agreed to form a parliamentary bloc with the Alignment's liberal coalition partner, the Independent Liberal Party. This enhances the liberals' bargaining power in the negotiations for a new

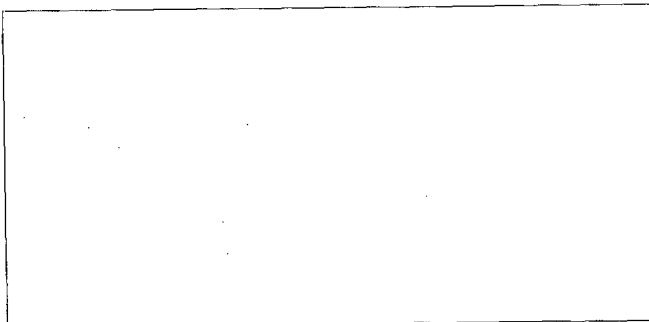
coalition, particularly with regard to the conservative National Religious Party.

AT THE FRONT

15 [As Egypt and Israel this week pursued a breakthrough on the disengagement problem, and cease-fire violations continued on both fronts. On one occasion, sporadic firing on the Golan Heights escalated into an artillery duel in which one Israeli soldier was killed. The Israelis also at least once shelled fedayeen positions inside Lebanon.]

15 [On the Suez front, UN observers reported violations along the entire length of the canal. Limited tank and artillery exchanges were reported in both the northern and central sectors.]

12 [In response to Egyptian cease-fire violations, Israeli troops halted several of the daily supply convoys to Suez and the encircled Egyptian Third Army. Defense Minister Dayan had publicly warned on January 14 that Israel might stop the convoys if the cease-fire violations continued. Israel has suffered over 150 casualties in the fighting on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts since the October cease-fire went into effect.]



Israel, meanwhile, placed new commanders in charge of its forces on both the Syrian and Egyptian fronts. Major General Gur, chief of the Israeli military negotiating team in Geneva, assumed command of the northern front. Major General Adan, who led one of the armored divisions that broke through to the west bank of the Suez Canal, took over the southern command. Both are highly capable professionals. It is unclear if Gur will retain his post on the Geneva negotiating team.

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