

Geneva Conference On The Rocks, War On The Horizon

Prospects for a Geneva Conference on the Middle East, which appeared bright following the Oct. 1 U.S.-Soviet communique which endorsed the "rights of the Palestinians," have been cast into grave doubt due to the Carter Administration's lack of resolve in following through its Middle East policy initiative in the field of energy.

In the hands of Vice President Walter Mondale and Energy Secretary James R. Schlesinger, the Administration's no-growth energy policy has become a vehicle for ominous threats of U.S. and Israeli military action to seize Arab oil fields.

General Yigal Yadin's fascist Democratic Movement for Change, which this week voted to join the Likud government coalition of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, is only one signal from Israel that the Middle East has taken a turn for confrontation. Last month, General Meir Amit, a former chief of Israeli Intelligence and close partner of Yadin in the DMC, said that Israel should attack and destroy Arab oil fields in a new war, and it is expected that Yadin's DMC will cooperate with Schlesinger's oil war strategy. In addition, a "practice mobilization" of Israeli troops took place this week, along with new Israeli warnings about a possible outbreak of warfare in tense southern Lebanon.

The Israeli war threat is primarily coordinated by Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, who, since his U.S. visit, has worked overtime to disrupt and sabotage the thrust behind the U.S.-Soviet joint Middle East statement. But Dayan, who last week released secret and sensitive U.S.-Israeli "working papers" that were the subject of continuing negotiations between the U.S. and the Arabs, is himself under increasing attack by circles close to Prime Minister Begin. French sources report that Samuel Katz, a close Begin confidante, may be named to replace Dayan.

The Israeli tactic to sabotage Geneva is centered around an attempt to provoke the Arab states and the

Palestine Liberation Organization into adopting, in response to continued Israeli attacks on the PLO, a hardline refusal to attend Geneva. By this means, Israel hopes to isolate the Arabs and gain the support of the U.S. and Western Europe.

But there is little sign that the Arabs, including the PLO, intend to fall for Israel's provocations. Instead, a unified Arab position emerged this week in response to U.S. diplomacy, in which the Arab states—including Egypt—reaffirmed the PLO as the sole legitimate representatives of the Palestinians. Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy announced that Egypt had asked the U.S. to "amend" the working paper to include a direct reference to the PLO. "Let it be clear that the PLO alone has the competence to speak in the name of Palestinians," said Fahmy. Meanwhile, Syria made it clear that it would not attend Geneva without the PLO, and U.S. analysts said that Egypt and Jordan could not go to Geneva without Syria.

The PLO, however, has not yet rejected the diplomatic efforts underway, and scheduled an important meeting of its Central Council for later this month. Among the options under discussion is the formation of the Palestinian "government-in-exile" which could represent the Palestinians at Geneva, thereby bypassing Israeli objections to dealing with the PLO itself.

The success of such a strategy depends heavily on Western Europe. The PLO is counting on support from Western Europe before it acts to create a government-in-exile, and one important signal was the reference by West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to "Yasser Arafat of the PLO" in listing those who cooperated in the West German antiterrorist campaign. The Franco-German axis is thus the crucial component of Middle East diplomacy, and a series of contacts this week by both countries with Israel and Arab states may signal a renewed diplomatic and economic push by Western Europe toward the Middle East.