

Will Cairo Lead To Geneva?

The upcoming meeting in mid-December in Cairo, described by Egypt's President Sadat as a "pre-Geneva" gathering, should maintain the crucial momentum toward reconvening the Geneva peace conference on the Middle East later this year or early in 1978. But, in the fast-moving pace of current Middle East diplomacy, there is a lurking danger that — under pressure from Henry Kissinger, Walter Mondale, and General Moshe Dayan — Egypt and Israel could be pushed into a disastrous bilateral pact that would fatally destabilize the entire region.

The meeting, originally called by Sadat for Dec. 3 — immediately accepted by the Israelis — has been postponed now until sometime in mid-December in order to allow for diplomacy to heal the breach in the Arab position opened by the Sadat meeting with Israel's Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization, who turned down the initial invitation to the Cairo meeting, are being asked by Egypt to reconsider the request.

But the split between Egypt and Syria reflects the deeper and more dangerous complications that have arisen since the announcement of the Sadat initiative in mid-November. The U.S. and the USSR, neither of whom bears a direct responsibility for the sudden turn in Middle East negotiations, are now suspicious that the Sadat-Begin moves might upset the delicate balance of superpower relations in the volatile Middle East. Thus, while both Washington and Moscow want to cooperate in the establishment of a Middle East settlement, there is a danger that both might find themselves on opposite sides in a showdown unless certain obstacles are smoothed over.

There are signs that France and the West Europeans are seeking to mediate between the U.S. and USSR while lending constructive support to the Middle East peace process.

Divisions in U.S., Israel

Although key members of the Carter Administration, such as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, are insisting that Washington stick to its stated policy of encouraging only an overall settlement, the office of Vice President Mondale is the center of the pro-Henry Kissinger network in the White House. While Vance, for instance, reportedly cautioned against a too eager acceptance of the Sadat invitation to Cairo lest it be construed that Washington was encouraging a separate Israel-Egypt pact, the White House — under Mondale's influence — refused to delay.

Further, according to Walter Cronkite of CBS News, Brzezinski and Mondale have disagreed sharply in recent days over the Middle East.

The disagreement was reflected in the Carter press

conference on Nov. 30. While Carter reiterated the Administration's position that the Cairo meeting should lead to a Geneva conference and praised Moscow for having "moved toward a much more balanced position" recently, he also issued a veiled threat to support a separate peace. After warning Syria and Jordan, and the USSR, not to abandon the Geneva process, Carter said that otherwise "an alternative might have to be pursued."

Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, in a joint communiqué with Syria's Foreign Minister Abdel Halim Khaddam, took up the challenge on Dec. 1. "Should the Geneva conference be wrecked, those responsible would bear a heavy responsibility," said the communiqué. TASS attacked the Cairo conference as a "cover for a separate deal between Egypt and Israel."

Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization, which are flirting with the loud-mouthed "rejection front" of Arabs opposed to a peaceful settlement with Israel, have not given any sign of being ready to give up on Geneva, despite their attendance at the circus-like meeting in Libya this week of a Rejection Front bloc. By the same token, the Soviets, who also turned down an invitation to Cairo, remained noncommittal on its stance. "Let us wait and see how the current negotiations and consultations conclude," stated Gromyko.

Overall Settlement

The idea of a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace was publicly rejected by Sadat.

"I'm not at all aiming at a bilateral agreement between me and Israel," Sadat told CBS in a televised interview. "I shall be discussing a whole settlement this time, not a settlement with Egypt only, because it will not bring peace."

"If everyone doesn't agree, I shall be proceeding to Geneva, also for a comprehensive settlement, and whenever we reach results I shall call an Arab summit here (in Cairo), and put what we have already agreed upon before them."

On the crucial question of the participation of the PLO at Geneva, Sadat implied that he had reached a private understanding with Arafat on that question. "I think the PLO is so broad-minded that they will solve this problem for us," said Sadat. "I'm sure of it, in spite of what is happening now — the shouting and so on."

Depending on the outcome of the Cairo meeting, it is widely expected that Saudi Arabia and Jordan will launch a diplomatic effort to reconcile Syria and Egypt around a common approach to Geneva, and that the PLO will go along. So far, Arafat has been silent on the Sadat initiative, but his tacit support for Sadat was indicated by his presence, in Cairo, at the speech last month when Sadat first announced his willingness to visit Jerusalem.