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ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

USSR MAINTAINS NONCOMMITTAL STANCE ON PEACE CONFERENCE ISSUES

In a period of intensive diplomatic activity in preparation for the Geneva peace conference, Moscow, not surprisingly, has avoided substantive comment on the issues. While it has described the forthcoming conference as an event of great significance, it has commented only in passing on the problems involved in convening the conference. Thus PRAVDA in its international review on the 16th remarked without elaboration that "tense efforts" had been made during the past week to prepare for the conference. Soviet media briefly traced Secretary Kissinger's 13-17 December Middle East tour, noting that both Kissinger and Egypt's as-Sadat described their talks as "useful," but also noting that foreign newsmen had reported that the Secretary "met with great difficulties" during his negotiations in Cairo and "especially in Damascus." Comment tailored for North American audiences underlined Soviet-U.S. cooperation in arranging the conference, but a commentary broadcast to Arab listeners remarked sourly that the United States was trying to take major credit for "positive changes" in the Middle East.

In the only current remarks on the situation by a Soviet leader, Podgorny, speaking at a dinner for the PRG delegation on the 18th, expressed hope that the Geneva conference would serve the attainment of a lasting and just peace in the Middle East. He pledged that the Soviet Union would "assist in every way a reliable settlement" of the conflict, specifying Moscow's standard terms for such a settlement--Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories and assurance of the legitimate rights of all states and peoples of the area, including the Palestinians.

UN ROLE TASS on the 18th reported that identical letters had been handed to UN Secretary General Waldheim by the U.S. and Soviet UN delegates expressing the hope that Waldheim would agree to serve as the official host of the conference and preside in the opening phase. The TASS summary noted that the conference would be under the co-chairmanship of the Soviet Union and the United States, and that the "question of other participants" would be discussed during the first stage of the conference. TASS' account did not mention

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that the letters expressed the hope that the secretary general could make available a representative "who would keep you informed" as the conference proceeded, or the suggestion that the Security Council president should consult informally with council members with a view to securing their concurrence.

TASS had briefly reported the Security Council resolution on the 15th, noting that it expressed confidence that the UN secretary general would play a "full and effective role" at the peace conference and would preside over the meetings "if the parties so desire." The TASS dispatch reported that the resolution passed by 10 votes with the Big Four abstaining and China not voting.

While Moscow generally had not publicized its co-sponsorship of the Geneva conference, a Losev commentary broadcast to North America on the 14th had reminded listeners that "the Soviet Union and the United States are working together to arrange the conference," and recalled that Kissinger in his recent Washington news conference had mentioned the USSR's "constructive contribution" toward organizing the talks and working out such matters as agenda, participants and procedures.

U.S. AID TO ISRAEL In a slightly more critical tone than Moscow has customarily shown toward Kissinger, TASS in reporting the Secretary's address to the Pilgrims in London on the 12th noted that he "admitted" that the United States had not done everything in its power prior to the October fighting to contribute to a lasting Middle East settlement. TASS skipped over his remark that the United States had demonstrated great restraint once the October war began "until the Soviet effort reached the point of massive intervention." But in noting his explanation of the U.S. arms resupply to Israel, it claimed that he "tried to justify" U.S. policy in the area, particularly the arms supplies which "encourage Israel's stubborn refusal" to withdraw its troops from occupied Arab territories. Moscow has publicized Senator Fulbright's objections to appropriations for military aid to Israel, and the Losev commentary on the 14th remarked in passing that "no flood of American weapons" could promote a settlement.

The matter of American military aid was also raised in an Arabic-language commentary on the 18th which revived, for the first time since the October fighting began, a complaint which the Soviet Union had previously made at times of U.S.

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initiatives in the Middle East, namely, that the United States was trying to "persuade the world that the key to solving the Middle East question is in Washington's hands." The commentary, a routine-level, unattributed talk, echoed past arguments that "this key" remained in the hands of the Arab countries "on whose side stands the Soviet Union." In the first public display of Soviet pique over U.S. diplomatic initiatives the commentary charged that "efforts of American diplomacy at present are concentrated on suggesting that the greatest credit is due to Washington for the positive changes" in the Middle East. As a case in point, the broadcast cited Deputy Secretary of State Rush as saying that peace in the Middle East could only be achieved with American help. Noting that Rush was testifying before Congress in support of military aid to Israel, the commentary wondered whether "military aid to the aggressors" could be related to efforts to restore peace in the Middle East.

SYRIAN POSITION Moscow has not commented on the Syrian decision not to attend the conference, TASS merely reporting on the 18th that Damascus said the decision, announced that day, was adopted after a series of contacts with Egyptian and U.S. officials and in light of facts pointing to "maneuvers" aimed at serving Israel's interests. On the 19th TASS reported an Egyptian Government spokesman as saying that progress at the Geneva talks would open the door to participation by Syria and other Arab countries. Earlier, Moscow had indicated Syrian readiness to attend, with an Arabic-language broadcast on the 15th citing President al-Asad to that effect. Soviet media had pointed out that Israel had agreed to participate in a conference with Egypt and Jordan but not with Syria because Damascus refused to provide a list of Israeli prisoners of war. Moscow objected that settlement of the crisis was impossible without Syrian participation as "one of the victims of Israeli aggression." TASS on the 18th said that Arab papers, commenting on Israel's "provocative hullabaloo" about the POW issue, recalled that while there was a POW exchange between Israel and Egypt Tel Aviv did not meet its commitment on withdrawal of troops to the 22 October positions.

PALESTINIAN ISSUES TASS on 14 December reported that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had decided to convene a session of the Palestine National Council in January to discuss the questions of "the future of the West Bank and Gaza" and of Palestinian representation at

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the peace talks. Palestinian representation at the peace conference was also broached by Middle East specialist Belyayev in a 12 December LITERARY GAZETTE article. Belyayev pointed out that the recent Arab summit conference in Algiers had confirmed the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians. Thus when the "interested sides" begin to discuss possible variants of a Palestinian solution during the "forthcoming political settlement," Belyayev said, they will have to deal with the PLO. Suggesting some Soviet impatience with the Palestinians' indecision, Belyayev admonished the PLO on the need to "formulate clearly its attitude" toward "those specific proposals . . . which may be worked out in the process of a settlement."

The 17 December Palestinian attack on a PanAm aircraft at Rome airport and the hijacking of a Lufthansa plane brought not only the customary Soviet publicity for PLO denials of involvement but also criticism from PRAVDA. TASS on the 19th reported PRAVDA commentator Orestov as saying that world public opinion viewed with alarm the "political aspect" of these "crimes" committed by "people who call themselves Palestinians." Orestov found it suspicious that the incidents coincided with preparations for the Geneva conference which, among other questions, must discuss ways of achieving a just settlement of the Palestinian problem. In this context, Orestov declared, attempts to set public opinion against the legitimate demands of "Palestinian patriots" were "provocative."

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