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Egypt and Syria, having patched up their recent quarrel, are making a concerted effort to reopen Middle East peace talks at Geneva. Neither country expects rapid progress, but both of them—and Saudi Arabia—will be looking to the US to use its influence to end the negotiating stalemate this year.

The Arab Peace Offensive

 The principal Arab states, having overcome the paralyzing divisions produced by the Egyptian-Syrian quarrel over Egypt's conclusion of a second Sinai accord with Israel in 1975 and by Syria's intervention in Lebanon last year, are now in a position to apply strong diplomatic pressure for an early reconvening of the long-recessed Geneva conference on a Middle East peace settlement.

The Egyptians are fostering high expectations of diplomatic movement in 1977 and are attempting to marshal as much Arab and international support as possible to press the US and Israel to resume serious, comprehensive peace negotiations.

There are fundamental constraints on the flexibility of the Arabs, but their strategy in coming months will be to project an image of reasonableness on such key issues as the future of a Palestinian state, an end to the state of war, and oil pricing.

Despite lingering mutual suspicion, Egyptian President Sadat and Syrian President Asad are likely to be able to maintain sufficient unity to resist any pressures to resume the step-by-step negotiating process in lieu of a return to Geneva. They may also be able to sell previously unpalatable positions to their Arab colleagues, at least on matters of procedure and implementation.

Asad has learned from the confron-

tations of the past year that Syria's interests are best served when he works in harmony with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. By winning their endorsement of Syria's prominent role in Lebanon at the Riyadh and Cairo summits, Asad ended Syria's diplomatic isolation and eased the financial burden of its Lebanese campaign.

Reconciliation with Egypt also paid off in reduced domestic tension and prepared the way for what Syria believes will be further substantial financial assistance from conservative oil states.

Sadat, in turn, learned that he could not challenge Asad so long as Asad has Saudi backing and that he could not lead in formulating Arab strategy without the support of both Syria and Saudi Arabia.

Should negotiations reach a stalemate because of US or Israeli positions, there would probably be no disruption of Egyptian-Syrian coordination. Instead, failure to achieve whatever the Arab side considers substantial diplomatic progress by the end of 1977 almost certainly would lead to friction between the US and both Egypt and Syria, to Saudi support for further oil price increases, and to renewed Arab preparations for at least a limited war to achieve their political objectives.

Preparing for Geneva

Egypt and Syria have called for a resumption of the Geneva conference by March—not intending that this date should be taken literally, but wishing to underscore the urgency of the Arab peace offensive. The Syrians are almost certain-

ly even more skeptical than the Egyptians that rapid movement is possible; Asad is less optimistic than Sadat about the extent of Israeli flexibility and the degree to which the US is able to influence Israel.

The key Arab leaders nonetheless will expect immediate movement to convene a Geneva meeting soon after the Israeli election set for May 17, regardless of the outcome of the election.

A particularly important juncture may come at the next ministerial meeting of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, scheduled for July. If by then the Saudis are disappointed with the US response on peace negotiations, they probably would go along with the oil price hikes demanded by most other OPEC members.

The commitment of Egypt and Syria to a "peace offensive" does not mean they will be more flexible on substantive matters if negotiations in Geneva resume. Both countries probably now have a realistic appreciation that any comprehensive negotiations will be protracted. Neither Sadat nor Asad is prepared to reach a peace settlement as defined by the Israelis, one that would include diplomatic recognition, commercial intercourse, and "defensible borders." The Arabs' overall negotiating goals still are Israel's withdrawal from the territory occupied in 1967 and restoration of Palestinian rights. Asad does apparently now share Sadat's willingness to discuss the end of the state of war with Israel.

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Egyptian President Sadat (c) and Vice President Mubarak (r) welcome Syrian Foreign Minister Khaldam to Cairo for recent talks

The two leaders differ in their interpretation of Palestinian "national rights" and in their willingness to make sacrifices for the Palestinian cause, but both appear to agree on the ultimate goal of creating a small Palestinian state consisting of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and on the need to find a formula for including the Palestinians in the negotiating process. Sadat and Asad may be prepared to go back to Geneva initially without the PLO, but would be likely to press the US and Israel on Palestinian representation once talks begin. Without a resolution of the representation issue, it is uncertain that any of the Arab front-line states would be willing to conclude new territorial agreements.

Egypt is on record as proposing that the Palestinians should have a separate delegation at Geneva. There is little doubt, however, that Egypt would endorse Syria's recently announced preference for a single, joint Arab delegation. Palestine

Liberation Organization chief Yasir Arafat, who privately has long been willing to go to Geneva if invited on acceptable terms, would find it hard to reject a formula acceptable to Syria and Egypt.

The two countries would apparently also be agreeable to a combined PLO-Jordanian delegation, and they have urged King Husayn and Arafat to reach a political accommodation. Talks between the Jordanians and Palestinians are scheduled to begin this weekend in Amman.

At Geneva

Even if the Geneva conference is reconvened, rapid progress is unlikely this year. There are no signs that any of the principal parties are prepared to make significant new concessions, and procedural wrangling and public posturing would almost certainly delay progress.

On the other hand, neither the Arabs nor the Israelis apparently believe it to be in their interest to force—or to be held

responsible for forcing—the collapse of negotiations as long as talks on substantive issues are proceeding.

The most promising approach at Geneva probably would include abandoning plenary sessions in favor of small working groups. These might permit bilateral talks between representatives of Israel and each of the Arab states, or discussions by separate groups that would focus on different aspects of the general settlement problem, such as territorial withdrawals, demilitarization, guarantees, verification, the boycott, propaganda, and the role of the UN and the US.

Discussing a range of issues in a variety of forums would not necessarily speed progress on all issues, but it probably would allow headway to be made on some, and would at least delay failure and the perception of failure.

The Palestinian Problem

A resolution of the Palestinian

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representation issue, for which the Arabs will press hard, would not assure progress on the substance of the Palestinian and West Bank issues, including the intractable Jerusalem problem. The Israelis are adamantly opposed to giving up any part of Jerusalem and to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. They would much prefer to put off negotiations over the West Bank—even with Jordan—until much later.

For Egypt and Syria, the major problem will be to force the Palestinians to accept a truncated state, comprising the West Bank and Gaza, and coexistence with Israel. The repair of the Egypt-Syria rupture has reduced Arafat's room for maneuver and sharply diminished his potential for disrupting any negotiating strategy agreed upon by the key Arab states.

The complexities of Egyptian-Syrian-Palestinian relations, however, will tend to limit the pressure on the PLO and lead to disputes between Egypt and Syria over the degree to which either should exert control over the Palestinians.

Arafat is not yet in a position to deliver

the entire Palestinian movement on Egypt and Syria's terms. But the debacle suffered by the Palestinians in Lebanon apparently has led him to conclude that the PLO should moderate its political stance, in part as a means of deflecting Egyptian pressure and forestalling Asad's efforts to replace him with a pro-Syrian leader.

Arafat privately has implied that he would accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, and his position has been publicly echoed by other Palestinian spokesmen.

Arafat's goal in coming months will be to achieve a united Palestinian position to present to the various parties to the Geneva conference. Recent discussion of forming a government-in-exile, a move long urged by the Egyptians, is one indication of this, as is the call for a session of the Palestine National Council.

The PLO leader will continue to meet stout resistance from the various fedayeen "rejectionists," and bickering among the disparate factions is likely to preclude a unified Palestinian position.

Complete unanimity among the Palestinians is not, however, a necessary precondition for their participation in the

peace process. Arafat still speaks for the majority of the Palestinians, and Sadat and Asad are likely to lean heavily on the PLO leadership to support him.

Asad would prefer to replace Arafat with a leader more amenable to Syrian influence, but there is no other leader who could hope in the short run to exercise comparable authority over the Palestinian movement.

In the meantime, Syria will work to undermine the rejectionist fedayeen. Much of the occasional fighting in Lebanon is a result of the efforts of Syrian forces or Syrian-backed PLO groups to weaken the rejectionist groups' military capability and to arrest or assassinate some of their leaders.

Coordination of negotiating strategy between the PLO and Egypt and Syria has barely begun and will be a complex, quarrelsome process. The outcome, however, is likely to be influenced by two major lessons the moderate Palestinians have learned from the Lebanese civil war:

- None of the key Arab states is going to sacrifice its national interests by backing maximum Palestinian goals or endorsing fedayeen radicalism.
- Syria's prohibition of cross-border fedayeen operations from Lebanon has forced the Palestinians to abandon guerrilla tactics against Israel in favor of negotiations for the return of a portion of Palestinian territory.

This does not mean that some Palestinian elements will not continue to oppose negotiations by attempting terrorist acts against both Israel and the conservative Arab states. Nor does it mean that Palestinian irredentism has been curbed; even Arafat and other so-called moderates will try to justify settling for a small state now by arguing that long-term demographic trends in Israel are in the Arabs' favor.

Saudi Position

Next to Egypt and Syria, Saudi Arabia will play the most important role on the Arab side if there is movement toward peace talks. The willingness of the Saudis to risk undermining the long-standing Saudi political goal of unity of the OPEC



Syrian President Asad

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countries is in part a result of the peace offensive of Egypt and Syria.

The Saudis have worked behind the scenes to ease Egyptian-Syrian differences and to help bring about a tenuous peace in Lebanon. They believe the Egyptian-Syrian peace initiative has a real chance—provided the US cooperates. They think their action to hold down prices has created an obligation on the part of the US to understand and cooperate with Arab efforts.

The Saudis' action was not solely motivated by their desire to support and encourage the peace offensive; they also hoped to prevent an unfavorable US response in other areas affecting Saudi interests, specifically with regard to US arms sales and the Arab boycott against firms doing business with Israel.

Egypt and Syria can expect the Saudis to back them with a further rise in oil prices if the Saudis conclude this is

necessary to spur the negotiating process. The Saudis almost certainly would take such a step, although they probably would not take direct action—such as an embargo against the US—in 1977.

They would, moreover, continue to exercise some restraint on future OPEC price rises, primarily because they fear the effects of a very large price hike on Western political and economic stability.

Jordan

Jordan's role in the peace offensive will be limited largely to supporting Egypt and Syria and serving, as it has in the past, as a conduit for conveying Syrian views to US policy makers. King Husayn can take no territorial negotiating initiatives on his own, and he is unlikely to contest adherence by Egypt and Syria to the resolution adopted at the 1974 Arab summit meeting that empowered the PLO to negotiate the return of the West Bank.

Jordan's role will become important

only when negotiations are under way on the formation of a Palestinian state. Jordan's Palestinian connection is a major reason for its diplomatic importance, and the roughly one million Palestinians in Jordan comprise the largest single group of expatriate Palestinians anywhere in the area. To protect his security interests, King Husayn is likely to seek some form of confederation or other close political association with a new Palestinian state.

President Sadat's recent suggestion that any such state be linked with Jordan may be indicative of an Arab intention to press for such an arrangement, once negotiations begin, in order to bypass Israeli objections to dealing with the PLO.

Asad has expressed tentative support for this idea, but he and Sadat may only be testing US and Israeli willingness to work out a satisfactory compromise on the Palestinian question. [REDACTED]

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