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Middle East

EGYPT-ISRAEL

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Egyptian President Sadat's bold peace initiative in visiting Israel this past week has subjected the rigidities of the Arab-Israeli dispute to a major shock treatment comparable to the one produced by his equally bold war initiative in 1973. In both instances, his action particularly altered the psychological factor that has helped influence the course of the dispute: the war launched by the Egyptian leader and his Syrian ally resulted in the acquisition by the Arab side of important new self-respect; Sadat's trip to Jerusalem at least put a dent in Israel's deep distrust of the Arabs.

At this stage, however, an Arab-Israeli settlement remains well out of sight and the immediate future is fraught with sobering uncertainties and dangers. More than ever, much depends on Sadat's ability to maintain himself at the head of the most important state in a volatile Arab world now again sharply divided by an action he has taken unilaterally. Indeed, unless he means to ignore his vow not to conclude a separate peace with Israel, the Egyptian leader must gain positive support from Saudi Arabia and also win over Syria, the most important "confrontation" state after Egypt. That will require a major shift by the Damascus regime of President Asad, which this week made common cause with radical Arab governments in denouncing Sadat.

The speeches by Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Begin in the Israeli Knesset on 20 November clearly did nothing to break down obstacles—notably the Palestinian representation issue—that have stood in the way of an early resumption of the Geneva peace talks and, as of mid-week, there were no solid indications that

the private talks between the two leaders did either. But at a minimum, the visit will increase pressure on both governments to find some formula for overcoming at least procedural difficulties and proving that the historic visit had useful practical results.

Reaction in Egypt

In the face of Arab criticism, most Egyptians are banding together in support of Sadat, who was given a hero's welcome on his return to Cairo. They believe that their President's gamble—although it holds many dangers—has brought credit to Egypt's peace effort. Moreover, the feeling is widespread that Egypt had the right to take such a step because it has shouldered the greatest burden in pursuing Arab objectives in both war and peace.

Senior members of the government and military establishment have strongly endorsed Sadat's efforts and are encouraging—along with the Egyptian press—the notion that he made significant headway in the private talks. This positive sentiment is by no means unanimous, however. Many Egyptians are skeptical of government optimism and are wondering whether Sadat has taken too great a risk and whether he has been entirely candid.

In Israel

The Israeli public, for its part, seems disappointed that its own government did not rise to the occasion and match Sadat's gesture. As a result, the Begin government is on the spot to respond soon in some positive way that will give peace efforts a further boost.

A cleavage may already be developing between Begin and hardliners, on the one hand, and the bulk of public opinion, the Israeli press, the opposition Labor Party, and perhaps even some moderates within the governing coalition, over the direction Israel should now take. The moderates are urging the government to make some appropriate concession that will impart

new momentum to reconvening the Geneva conference.

But hardliners seem even less convinced of the utility of Geneva. While Israeli hawks are now convinced of Sadat's desire for peace, the negative reaction of Syria, the Palestinians, and other Arabs to the visit has simply reconfirmed the view of many hardliners that—apart from Egypt—none of the other Arabs are ready to accept Israel and make real peace. As a result, they believe Begin should now concentrate on bilateral negotiations with Egypt.

Begin and Foreign Minister Dayan—the principal formulators of Israel's policy toward negotiations—may now be playing for time to let passions subside and to devise a strategy and tactics for dealing with Sadat's unexpected gambit. Thus far, the emphasis has been primarily on pursuing the dialogue Sadat and Begin set in motion last weekend.

Other Arabs

The Syrians doubtless hope to isolate Sadat again as they did after he signed the second Sinai disengagement agreement two years ago, and possibly to force him to retreat. They may not be successful, however.

The vehemence of the Syrian reaction is already causing some backlash among many Arab and other UN representatives. Moreover, apart from the Palestine Liberation Organization and a few avowedly radical states, the Arabs have not given Syria the grist it had undoubtedly anticipated for its anti-Sadat mill. Jordan has given a tentatively favorable response, and Morocco and Sudan have openly supported Sadat.

The reaction of Saudi Arabia will be crucial in determining how far Syria can carry its campaign. The Saudis' chief objection appears to have been to Sadat's independent action in arranging for the visit rather than to the fact of the trip itself.

If the Saudis feel there is any hope for progress, they might exert pressure on Syria to ease its criticism. The Saudis, however, fear that the trip will prove to have been a major misstep unless the US exerts pressure on Israel to offer meaningful concessions in return.

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