

Middle East

EGYPT-ISRAEL

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Egyptian President Sadat's startling proposal on 9 November to plead the Arab cause before the Israeli parliament in person—perhaps only intended as a rhetorical flourish when delivered—this week became in turn a serious possibility and then a likelihood. Israeli Prime Minister Begin quickly issued a formal invitation and Sadat agreed to travel to Jerusalem this weekend.

The Egyptian leader apparently gained encouragement from the initial enthusiastic reaction of many of his countrymen. The proposed venture has provoked open opposition, however, from important foreign Arabs, notably Syrian President

Asad, and on 17 November Sadat's own Foreign Minister resigned in protest. Much about Sadat's initiative bothers these critics, but most especially, the suggestion it conveys to them of Egyptian willingness to conclude a separate peace.

Sadat seems sincerely convinced that a visit to Israel will help break down psychological barriers that have prevented effective negotiations between the Arabs and Israelis. At the same time, he is probably using the trip to heighten Arab fears—especially Syria's—that he is bold enough to move toward peace without them. This threat is the only significant leverage Egypt has over Syria, and it seems that Sadat is trying to exercise it dramatically in order to overcome Syrian inflexibility and keep the current peace initiative alive.

Sadat has indeed succeeded in arousing deep concern in Syria that he will again conclude—as he did in September

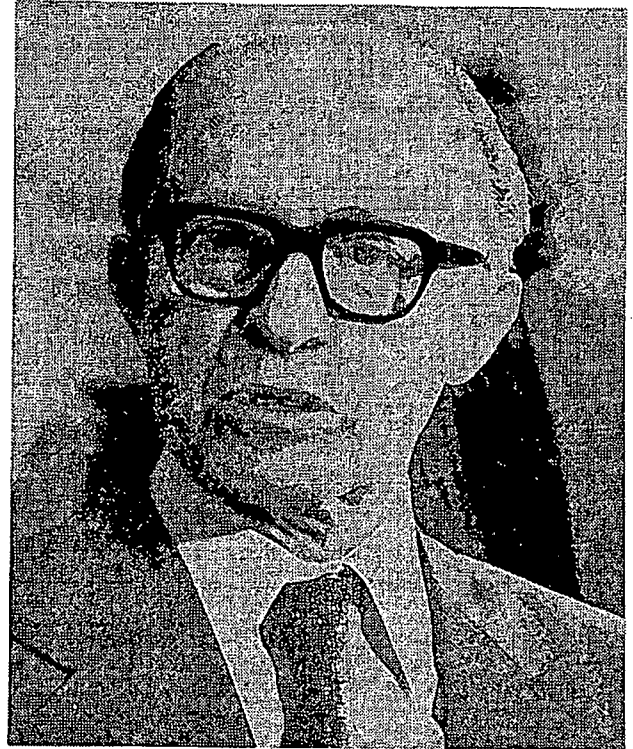
1975—a bilateral pact with Israel. But it is not clear that he has also succeeded in keeping Syria on a flexible path that will bring it to resumed Middle East peace talks in Geneva. The Syrians remain noncommittal on the conference, but President Asad, at the end of Sadat's brief visit to Damascus on 16-17 November, made an unusually forthright statement of Syria's opposition to the Egyptian President's initiative.

The Israelis have denied that their invitation to Sadat is intended to split Arab ranks, but Begin probably will try to probe Sadat's interest in negotiating a separate, final agreement if a multilateral Geneva conference cannot be convened.



President Sadat

UPI



Prime Minister Begin

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The Israelis have tried in various ways to encourage Sadat to consider a separate deal. Foreign Minister Dayan, for example, has hinted broadly that Begin would be prepared to negotiate another "interim accord" and has repeatedly implied that Israel has Egypt in mind.

At the same time, the Israelis are likely to be wary that Sadat might try to maneuver them into a position where Israel, not the Arabs, appears inflexible. They probably are concerned that Sadat may try to turn the tables on them and follow up his initiative by pressing for unpalatable changes in the US-Israeli working paper that sets forth guidelines for the proposed return to Geneva.

The Israelis would strongly resist any significant changes. They would find it particularly difficult to accept the idea of negotiating at Geneva with a unified Arab delegation instead of holding bilateral talks, as outlined in the working paper.

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