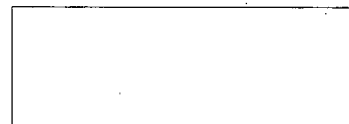


MEMORANDUM FOR: D/ORPA

The attached was done on short notice
at the DCI's request today.



Date November 25

81

As this memorandum was being typed, we received the attached press ticker indicating that Syria may have opted out of negotiations. With this little to go on, however, we are reluctant to conclude that Syria will definitely not go to Geneva. It is possible, for instance, that the Syrian information minister was merely stating a belief that Arab disarray makes Geneva unlikely now; this does not necessarily preclude the possibility that the Arabs could ease their differences and reverse tracks toward Geneva again.

Date

25 Nov 77

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URGENT!!!!!! SADAT - SYRIAE

DAMASCUS, Nov 25, REUTER - SYRIA SAID TONIGHT THAT EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT ANWAR SADAT'S VISIT TO ISRAEL LAST WEEKEND HAD WRECKED ANY CHANCES OF NEW MIDDLE EAST PEACE TALKS IN GENEVA. SYRIAN INFORMATION MINISTER AHMED ISKANDER TOLD A PRESS CONFERENCE THAT MR. SADAT'S INITIATIVE HAD CREATED DIVISIONS AMONG ARAB COUNTRIES WHICH PREVENTED THEM FROM NEGOTIATING WITH ISRAEL AS A SINGLE DELEGATION.

"CONSEQUENTLY THERE WILL BE NO GENEVA," HE SAID.

MR. ISKANDER SAID THE EGYPTIAN LEADER'S VISIT HAD ALSO STRENGTHENED ISRAEL'S POSITION AND INCREASED WHAT HE TERMED ITS INTRANSIGENCE.

SYRIA HAS BEEN BITTERLY CRITICAL OF MR. SADAT'S VISIT TO ISRAEL LAST WEEKEND. ‡

REUTER 1555

Comment:

Sounds pretty definitive, and likely to stick unless Sadat unveils something on the spectacular side in the way of Israeli concessions.

These comments represent the initial and tentative reaction of the CIA Operations Center and of the appropriate analytic component in the Agency.

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November 25, 1977

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Syria and Sadat's Israeli Trip

By reacting so vehemently to Egyptian President Sadat's visit to Israel, Syria is attempting to replay the situation that developed after the second Sinai disengagement agreement two years ago. At that time Sadat was vilified throughout the Arab world for "betraying" the Arab cause, and Syria put itself forth--and was generally regarded by most other Arabs--as the proper leader of the Arab cause and the true protector of Arab interests. Circumstances are by no means identical today, however, and Syrian President Asad has been unable to win the wholehearted sympathy of many of the key Arab parties whose support he enjoyed two years ago.

Asad is now caught in an uncomfortable position between the radical and the moderate Arab camps. Throwing in with the radicals and accepting the importunate calls of Libya and others to join a coalition of "rejectionists" would commit Asad to a decision, before he is ready, to opt out of peace negotiations. Yet a clear turn toward the moderate camp--on the heels of Asad's earlier denunciations and in the absence of any indication that Sadat's trip has brought tangible results--would be both embarrassing and, from Asad's standpoint, prematurely conciliatory.

Asad will no doubt straddle the two positions for as long as he can. Over the longer term, his actions will be determined by the amount of pressure his key moderate allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, put on him to stay on the negotiating path. The moderates' willingness to exert this pressure will depend in turn on whether Israel is seen to be making concessions as a result of Sadat's trip.

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RPM 77-10413

~~SECRET~~Syria and the Other Arabs

Asad no doubt expected initially, by denouncing Sadat and permitting Syrian press attacks calling for Sadat's overthrow, to generate wide support for Syria's position, not only among avowed radicals but also among more responsible Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Jordan. His gambit has not wholly succeeded. Although all Arab states share to one degree or another Asad's fears that Egypt will negotiate further bilateral agreements with Israel, Syria has not this time been able to count on the full backing of any of its allies except the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Saudi Arabia, despite serious misgivings about Sadat's tactics, is not prepared to write off his trip as useless and intends to press Syria for a moderation of its opposition. Jordan has been publicly favorable to the trip and is urging that Syria wait to see what subsequent developments bring. Even the PLO appears reluctant to pull away completely from Egypt. The PLO does not want a repeat of the situation after Sinai II when it threw in wholeheartedly with Syria against Egypt, only to find itself subjected to a harsh Syrian crackdown during the Lebanese civil war.

Asad has not thus far heeded the Saudi and Jordanian appeals for a cooler approach to his differences with Egypt. He has also, however, apparently not yielded to the blandishments of Arabs from the other side of the political spectrum--the group, led by Libya and including Algeria and rejectionist Palestinians, that has attempted since the Sadat trip to enlist Syria, along with Iraq, in a front of hardline Arabs openly opposed to negotiating with Israel.

Syria's standoffishness is partially attributable to its continuing rivalry with Iraq. The Iraqis, for that matter, still deeply distrust Syria and are apparently unwilling to accept Damascus as a true rejectionist. Iraq has so far refused to attend a rejectionist summit if Syria participates.

More significantly, however, Syria seems to be standing back because of a reluctance to close the door irrevocably on participation in peace negotiations. Throughout their virulent

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propaganda attacks on Sadat, the Syrians have been careful not to say anything that would prejudice their claim to a role in negotiations, and the joint Syrian-PLO statement issued on 22 November was careful to express a continued interest in "peace," if not specifically in peace negotiations.

Unattractive Alternatives

[REDACTED]

In fact, however, Asad is probably still uncertain about which way he ultimately wants to move. He is clearly playing a double game for now, trying to keep a foot in both the moderate and the radical camp, in an effort to keep all options open.

His alternatives are not, from his viewpoint, particularly attractive at present. Moving with the radicals would close off the negotiating option, in which Asad is still very much interested. Aligning himself with Egypt now, on the other hand, would demand more in the way of lost face than Asad is ever likely to concede and more even in terms of concessions to Israel than he is probably prepared to give. So long as he can keep his lines out in both directions, he loses nothing by letting Sadat take the lead for now, with Asad either stepping in to assume the role of Arab leader if Sadat fails or jumping on the negotiating bandwagon if Sadat succeeds.

The mere fact that Saudi Arabia and Jordan favor giving Sadat's Israeli venture a chance to work constitutes a subtle pressure on Asad that will at least give him pause before any decision to opt out of negotiations. Both the Saudis and the Jordanians harbor suspicions about Sadat's independent tactics that are similar to Syria's own, however, and both believe that Jordan cannot go to Geneva this time, as it did in 1973, without Syria and without some acceptable Palestinian representation.

The degree of pressure Saudi Arabia and Jordan exert on Syria will thus depend in large measure on their assessment of Israeli willingness to make concessions as a result of the trip. Neither country is likely to invest heavy political

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capital--Jordan has little leverage in any case--in pressuring Syria if it quickly comes clear that Israel will make no meaningful concessions, particularly the kind of concessions on Palestinian representation that would satisfy Syria and the PLO.

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