

~~SECRET~~**Middle East****ARAB STATES - ISRAEL**

Egyptian Prime Minister Anwar Sadat this week pressed his initiative for a Middle East settlement, receiving in return new assurances of cooperation from the Israelis—who would be happy if it leads to a separate peace with Egypt—and new denunciations from Arab critics anxious to block such a result.

Sadat's call on 26 November for an early preparatory conference in Cairo among all interested parties to prepare the ground for resuming the long-adjourned Geneva talks quickly brought a favorable response from Israel. Among the Arabs, Sadat's new move deepened the disarray brought on by his recent visit to Israel and spurred radical critics to call summit meetings that are clearly designed to bring more moderately-inclined Arab leaders—including Syria's President Asad and Palestine Liberation Organization chief Yasir Arafat—into the camp of those who still reject any dealings with Israel. The trend toward polarization put new pressure not only on Asad and Arafat but also on the involved moderate governments of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon.

The first of the radical-sponsored meetings was to have opened in Tripoli, Libya, on 1 December but was postponed a day. Among those who arrived to participate were Asad, Algerian President Boumediene, and Yasir Arafat, as well as delegations from Iraq and some of the "rejectionist" Palestinian groups.

Disagreements among the participants promise to dilute the impact of the Tripoli meeting. Syria is trying to shift the focus from rejection of all negotiations to rejection of Sadat's negotiating tactics. Mutual animosity between Syria and Iraq threatens to undermine another radical summit scheduled for 5 December in Baghdad.

Sadat's proposed conference—now set for mid-December—has not been en-

dorsed by any of the other principal Arab parties to the Arab-Israeli dispute. Sadat, buoyed by strong support at home, clearly wants to keep up the momentum generated by his trip to Jerusalem. In his statements the Egyptian President has repeatedly stressed that he is speaking for all the Arabs and does not intend a separate peace with Israel. But Israel in fact will probably be the only other principal party present when the Cairo conference convenes.

The failure of Saudi Arabia to support the Egyptian view clearly nettles Sadat; in his speech on 26 November he withheld his customary praise of the Saudis. For their part, the Saudis are still highly displeased that Sadat did not consult them in advance of the trip, and they are worried about its effect on Middle East peace prospects.

The widening breach in Arab ranks produced by Sadat's independent actions frustrates Saudi efforts to promote a moderate, joint Arab position. The Saudis believe the net effect will be to strengthen the Arab rejectionists and lengthen the odds against any Middle East peace settlement. In the absence of significant Israeli concessions to justify Sadat's gamble, the Saudis feel powerless to stem this polarization. The Saudis' unhappiness with Egypt probably will not affect their willingness to provide vital economic and military assistance, unless they believe Sadat is negotiating a separate peace with Israel.

Jordan's King Husayn has spoken favorably of Sadat's courage and vision, but he also wants to limit the damage to his relations with the Syrians that would result from too close an identification with Sadat's position. In an effort to appear even-handed, Jordan said it would attend the rival meetings sponsored by Egypt and Libya only if all concerned parties attended.

Syria and the Radical Arabs

Syria lost no time in announcing that it would not attend the Cairo meeting. President Asad is now caught in an uncomfortable position between the conciliatory attitudes of Egypt, which he cannot condone, and the negativism of the

Arab rejectionists including Syria's long-standing rival Iraq.

Asad would like to establish himself as the legitimate champion of Arab interests. His outspoken criticism of Sadat's trip has not won him the support he hoped to receive among Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Jordan. With only the radical Arab states willing to close ranks against Egypt, Asad is brought face to face with the problem of Syrian-Iraqi enmity.

Iraq's proposal for a summit in Baghdad next week appears in part to be an effort to call Syria's bluff and force Asad into accepting the rejectionist stance against any negotiations with Israel. Iraqi commentary has been challenging Syria's motives and sincerity in opposing Sadat.

The Syrians do not want to be backed into a position of total inflexibility on negotiations, nor do they want to lend support to Iraqi claims to leadership of the rejectionist movement. Syria would also be wary of jeopardizing financial aid from the Arab moderates by linking itself to the Iraqi position.

For now, the Syrians are talking tough and suggesting publicly that Sadat's trip virtually forecloses prospects for resuming the Geneva conference. They have been careful, however, to say nothing that would prejudice their claim to a role in peace negotiations.

The PLO

The Palestine Liberation Organization, which was relatively restrained in its criticism of Sadat's trip, played its rejection of Egypt's invitation to the Cairo conference in a similar low key. Yasir Arafat and other PLO moderates hope—like the Syrians—to avoid total identification with the rejectionist position.

At the same time, the strident position taken by the more militant Palestinian groups precludes anything that might look like acquiescence by Arafat in Sadat's actions. The Syrians are urging the PLO to stay in step with them, and the Palestinian leaders probably have few other options. The PLO leadership is worried, meanwhile, by Sadat's obvious omission of any reference to their organization in his recent statements.

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Prime Minister Begin's decision to accept Sadat's invitation to a Cairo meeting was strongly influenced by the Israelis' belief that Syria and perhaps others would reject the idea. The Israelis doubtless think that Sadat's determination to go ahead with the talks despite the opposition of the other Arabs strengthens prospects for a separate Egyptian-Israeli agreement.

Sadat's rush toward early negotiations prompted renewed calls from the Israeli press and opposition Labor Party leaders for a reexamination of concessions Israel could offer. Moderates within Begin's government may also press conservative cabinet members to do some hard thinking about concessions.

Israeli hard-liners, however, seem even less convinced of the value of a Middle East peace conference. Although they are now persuaded that Sadat wants peace, the reaction of Syria, the Palestinians, and other Arabs has reconfirmed the view of the hard-liners that—apart from Egypt none of the other Arabs are ready to make real peace.

Begin's speech to the Knesset early this week contained no surprises or hints of greater flexibility. By responding in low-key ways, Begin and Foreign Minister Dayan may be hoping to damp down pressures on them to move faster and farther than they are prepared or perhaps able to go. At the same time they want to appear responsive to Sadat but to avoid charges from Israeli hard-liners that they have given up too much in advance of real negotiations.

Soviet Reactions

The Soviets, apparently convinced that Sadat is seeking their exclusion once again from Middle East peacemaking efforts and also anxious to maintain the good will of the radical Arabs, have intensified their criticism of his recent moves after initially showing some restraint.

During the first few days after Sadat's visit to Israel, Soviet reaction was generally confined to low-key media coverage, and Sadat was not attacked by name. Moscow declined to embrace publicly the PLO's sharply critical stance toward

Sadat during a brief visit last week by a senior PLO official. The Soviets apparently felt there was some possibility that the Sadat trip might improve prospects for reconvening the Geneva conference, of which the USSR is co-chairman.

Over the past week, however, the Soviets seem to have become more convinced that Sadat is seeking to negate their role. Soviet media criticism of his trip sharpened, and *Pravda* last weekend attacked him directly. On 29 November, the Soviets turned down his invitation to the Cairo meeting.

At a luncheon on the same day for visiting Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam, Foreign Minister Gromyko complained publicly that Sadat was "proceeding separately from the united Arab front" and that the Egyptian initiatives were aimed at "exploding" the Geneva conference. Gromyko also suggested that the US must take "great responsibilities" for Sadat's actions.

The Soviets are starting a propaganda offensive to denigrate the Cairo meeting, but subsequently they may well try to assume a more constructive role, perhaps by calling for private discussions with the US or engineering their own preparatory meeting for Geneva. [redacted]

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