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## Middle East- Africa

### ARAB STATES-ISRAEL

The deepening splits in Arab ranks over Egyptian President Sadat's trip to Israel have prompted those Arab states caught in the middle to intensify their mediation efforts. Visits by Jordan's King Husayn to Syria and Egypt on 7 and 8 December and by Syrian President Asad to Saudi Arabia on 8 December are not likely, however, to produce any reconciliation between Cairo and its hard-line Arab critics, including Syria, in the near future. Sadat will probably open the preparatory Cairo peace conference on 14 December without the public backing of any Arab state, and with only Israel and the US behind his new approach to peace negotiations.

#### Tripoli Conference

The Tripoli conference of Arab states opposed to Sadat's initiatives, which convened in some disarray on 2 December, finally managed a display of unity in the form of a joint declaration—but only after Iraq had walked out. The declaration—signed on 5 December by Syria, Algeria, Libya, South Yemen, and a variety of Palestinian organizations—called for a "freeze" in diplomatic relations with Egypt and a boycott against Egyptian individuals and organizations that deal with Israel. It urged that the Arab League move its headquarters from Cairo and reconsider Egypt's membership.

In denouncing Sadat's latest peace initiatives, the document did not reject peace negotiations altogether—a victory for Syria, which wanted to avoid constricting its options. This omission caused the Iraqi walkout; Iraq had hoped to use the conference to force Syria to reconsider its previous support for a negotiated settlement.



Libyan leader Qadhafi meets Arab leaders in Tripoli (l to r); President Boumediene of Algeria, PLO leader Arafat, and Iraqi delegation leader, Taha Yasin Ramadhan

A joint statement issued by the Palestinian organizations at the conference impaired somewhat Syria's efforts to keep the door open to peace negotiations. In a militant declaration—likely to be sidestepped in practice by Palestine Liberation Organization chief Yasir Arafat—the Palestinian representatives reaffirmed the PLO's refusal to attend any peace conference called on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 242. The statement went beyond standard positions by also rejecting "reconciliation, recognition, and negotiations" with Israel.

#### Further Discord

Piqued by the resolutions issued by its Arab opponents, Egypt broke relations with the Arab states concerned on 5 December and closed Soviet cultural centers and consulates throughout Egypt on 7 December. The moves against the Soviets were in protest over what Sadat believes was their role in instigating the Tripoli

conference. Over the past two weeks, Moscow has taken a strong public position in support of the Arab hard-line countries, and has subjected Sadat to strong personal abuse in the Soviet press.

Sadat is probably simply trying to force Syria, the Soviets, and even Arab moderates such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia to make the kind of hard choices he feels he has made, and to commit themselves to a concerted peace effort. His actions are more likely, however, to deepen suspicions that Egypt has been planning all along to negotiate a separate settlement with Israel.

At a minimum, severing relations with erstwhile allies like Syria will make it more difficult for those states to keep the door open to Egypt—and for the Arab moderates to continue their efforts to forge a united Arab negotiating front.

Jordan and Saudi Arabia are nonetheless still trying to bring about a reconcili-

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ation. King Husayn's mission to Damascus and Cairo will probably be fruitless; Sadat has pointedly expressed little interest.

The Saudis may be somewhat more successful, however. Even before Sadat broke relations with the Tripoli meeting participants, Saudi Arabia apparently had decided that its only real option was to avoid involvement in the events splitting the Arab world and help devise a negotiating formula acceptable to both Cairo and Damascus. President Asad's arrival in Riyadh on 8 December signaled the first step in what will probably be a concerted Saudi effort to use its influence to reconcile the two sides. The Saudis will doubtless press for a gesture by Asad that will enable Cairo in the near term to restore diplomatic ties with Syria.

Riyadh's greatest fear is that Syrian and Palestinian intransigence will result eventually in a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement. Riyadh will thus be pressing Asad to come to terms with Sadat on a strategy for a reconvened Geneva peace conference.

#### Israel's Position

Israeli Prime Minister Begin showed some unexpected flexibility on the Palestinian issue in talks this week with British leaders in London. Although Begin flatly ruled out an independent Palestinian state, he publicly mentioned the problem of the "Palestinian Arabs." The statement is a significant departure; until now, Begin has scrupulously avoided using this expression, instead referring to the Palestinians as the Arabs of "Eretz Israel" (roughly, the Biblical land).

This switch suggests that Begin is prepared to offer West Bank Arabs some measure of political autonomy. Several recent Israeli press reports have indicated that teams in the Defense Ministry are working on negotiating proposals, presumably dealing primarily with security problems. The reports suggest that Israel intends to propose a plan designed to meet the desire of West Bank Arabs for greater political independence, while still permitting the Israelis to settle and maintain a military presence there indefinitely.

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