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Syrian President Asad, fundamentally unable to accept the legitimacy of Egyptian motives or to make allowances for Egyptian President Sadat's different tactics, has not been successful in rallying support from his Arab allies and he seems to be increasingly backing himself into a corner.

Syria: Asad's Opposition to Sadat's Peace Initiative

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Syrian President Asad has reacted to Egyptian President Sadat's readiness to deal directly with the Israelis with genuine shock and disapproval. The symbolism of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem aroused similar distaste in some other Arab capitals, but the more moderate of these states have come to recognize the opportunity the visit opened for further movement toward peace negotiations. Asad has not.

He regards Sadat's visit not merely as a blunder to be criticized and later forgiven but as a major concession to the "enemy." Asad is particularly incensed that Sadat is looking beyond a nonbelligerency treaty with Israel toward a true reconciliation. Asad is not ready for a peace that would also bring normalization of Arab-Israeli diplomatic relations, and he cannot accept with equanimity the fact that Sadat is.

Asad and the Other Arabs

Asad has made strenuous efforts to bring the other Arabs around to his position, but without notable success. In the immediate aftermath of the Sadat trip to Israel, when rejectionist Arab states such as Libya and Iraq were calling for an amalgamation of all Arabs opposed to Sadat's "capitulation," Asad saw an opportunity to rally widespread Arab support around Syria—and himself—as the only real defender of Arab interests.

He tried to do this at the summit in Tripoli early this month but succeeded only in attracting the support of Libya,

Algeria, and South Yemen—and in maintaining the support of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which he already enjoyed. Iraq's walkout in protest over Asad's continued adherence to the concept of negotiations left a substantial gap in the "pan-Arab front for resistance and confrontation" established at Tripoli.

Asad's subsequent attempts to justify his position to the more moderate Arab states during his meeting with Jordan's King Husayn on 7 December and his trip to Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states from 8 to 11 December were even less fruitful. These states sympathize with Asad's emotional reaction to the Sadat trip, but they do not accept his refusal to soften his adamant stand against Sadat.

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Asad seems to have an overriding desire to wring from the Arab moderates an acknowledgment of Sadat's injustice and a pledge of support for Asad's efforts to right it. But the course of action he has chosen—strident denunciation of Sadat accompanied by careful avoidance of any moves that would shut Syria out of future comprehensive peace negotiations—is failing. Asad's stridency and his willingness to consort with rejectionists worry the moderates, but he has not gone far enough



President Asad

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Foreign Minister Khaddam

to satisfy radicals such as Iraq. Syria is thus becoming increasingly isolated.

A Firmer Line

Asad has enough freedom of maneuver within Syria to take a softer line on Sadat--indeed, at least at the outset there was considerable support in Syria for Sadat's initiative. But Asad seems nonetheless to be gradually moving toward a more rigid opposition and a more uncompromising stance on peace negotiations.

Immediately after Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, Asad was careful in his public statements to leave the door open to a reconciliation with the Egyptian President. He emphasized that Syria still supported the idea of negotiations and looked forward to a Middle East peace conference at Geneva. That willingness is seldom so explicitly stated now, and Asad regularly permits Foreign Minister Khaddam to proclaim that "there is no room for mediation" of differences with Sadat.

The official Syrian position as enunciated by Khaddam is that Damascus rejects any political move "in any way connected" with Sadat's visit and its aftermath. This formulation is still vague enough to leave the Syrians considerable room for maneuver. If Asad saw an opportunity to rejoin peace negotiations on acceptable terms, he would not feel constrained by the statement.

It is increasingly evident, however, that Asad will not be flexible on what he would consider "acceptable terms." Asad has never had a feel for the give-and-take of negotiations, nor a sense that anything much is required of Syria in the way of concessions to keep peace talks going. He is appalled at the major concessions he thinks Sadat has already made, and this seems to have made him pull further back into a cautious position that is, if nothing else, familiar and comfortable.

