

Middle East
Africa



Algerian President Boumedienne (1) is greeted last December by Libyan leader Qadhafi in Tripoli, Libya

ARAB STATES - USSR

As the Egyptians and Israelis make preparations for the scheduled meetings later this month of the ministerial-level political and military committees created by President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin at their Christmas meeting in Ismailia, Arab opponents of the peace move have stepped up their efforts to derail it.

The hard-line Arabs are consulting about holding another summit conference among themselves to try to work out more effective tactics against Sadat's peace initiatives. Palestinian spokesmen have raised the specter of further military or terrorist operations if the PLO is ignored in any future settlement. Syria, the key member of the anti-Sadat grouping, apparently is seeking new military aid from the USSR, which has launched its own vigorous campaign to counter the Egyptian-Israeli contacts.

The participants in the anti-Sadat conference held in Tripoli, Libya, in early December—Syria, Iraq, Algeria, South Yemen, Libya, and the Palestine Liberation Organization—may meet again by mid-January either in Baghdad or Algiers. Iraqi President Bakr has offered to host such a gathering, and Algerian President Boumedienne, the Libyan Foreign Minister, and several "rejectionist" Palestinian leaders visited Baghdad this week on 3 January. They consulted separately with Iraqi leaders, presumably about a new conference and also about anti-Sadat moves that Bakr has proposed.

The hard-line Arabs believe a rapprochement between Iraq and Syria—whose rival Baathist regimes have long

been bitter enemies—is a necessity if an effective counter to Sadat is to be organized. There have been indications that some kind of accommodation may be reached. Any reconciliation, however, is likely only to be a temporary papering-over of the deep split between Baghdad and Damascus.

Although Syrian President Asad has reacted harshly against Sadat's present tactics, he probably is not willing to align Syria with Iraq's full-fledged "rejectionist" stance, which calls for no peace with Israel.

The Iraqis, disgruntled because their call for tough sanctions against Sadat and for explicit rejection of any form of negotiations with Israel was not adopted, left the meeting early.

Palestinian Activities

The Palestine Liberation Organization apparently is willing to use forceful means to discourage West Bank leaders from cooperating with Israel, Jordan, and by implication, Egypt as well.

Two West Bankers have in fact been killed since 26 December;

Palestinian groups claimed credit for both deaths.

The relatively moderate Palestinian faction led by PLO chief Yasir Arafat would probably hesitate, however, to directly sponsor a renewal of international terrorist operations at this time for fear of dealing itself completely out of any chance of participation in settlement talks. These moderates themselves may well be targets of Palestinian extremists. The PLO representative in London, a well known moderate who was assassinated on 4 January, may have been a victim of the extremists.

Syrians and Soviets

The Soviets, for their part, are eager to restore closer relations with Syria in an effort to ensure that President Asad does not abandon his opposition to Sadat's peace initiatives.

Moscow is exploiting the current split in Arab ranks in other ways in an effort to regain a measure of influence over the course of events in the Middle East. Soviet President and party leader Brezhnev, in a Pravda interview on 24 December, set a propaganda line clearly aimed at appealing to the hard-line Arabs. Referring to the Sadat-Begin contacts as "notorious talks," Brezhnev emphasized Soviet support for convocation of the Geneva conference but under conditions that would preclude it becoming a forum merely to ratify separate deals concluded elsewhere.

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