

Syria's terms for a peaceful settlement in the Middle East are the toughest of any Arab confrontation state.

Syria and the Peace Process

Prospects for an Egyptian-Syrian reconciliation have improved with the stalemate in the Egyptian-Israeli peace talks. The Syrians are probably encouraged by developments over the past few weeks, but Syrian President Assad continues to be very suspicious of Egyptian President Sadat and is unlikely to seek any reconciliation until the Egyptian leader abandons all of his direct negotiations with the Israelis.

The Saudi Arabians, who have long favored a united Arab approach to Middle East peace talks

The Syrian President probably wants to await the results of Secretary Vance's trip to the Middle East this coming week before moving very fast.

Even if some chill goes out of the relationship, it is unlikely that Assad and Sadat could agree either on diplomatic strategy or the terms of a settlement.

Even before Sadat went to Jerusalem last November, Assad differed with him on basic strategy, believing that the Arabs should try to involve both the US and the USSR in order to maximize Arab room for maneuver and maintain a credible military threat to Israel. Assad shares Sadat's conviction that the US holds the key to a negotiated settlement, but he believes Sadat was unwise to tie Egypt so closely to the US and to sever his ties with Moscow.

Assad considers the current stalemate as proof that his initial opposition to the Sadat initiative was correct. Last November, he predicted that Israel would not make any major concessions on the Palestinian issue and that Egypt would have to accept a separate deal with Israel.

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or admit the error of its approach. Assad is convinced that it is only a matter of time until Sadat admits failure.

Syrian efforts to create a counterweight to Sadat have failed. The "Steadfastness Front" formed at the Tripoli summit in December has proven impotent:

- Algeria is too far away and too involved in Western Sahara to aid Syria.
- Libya is undependable and has reneged on its promise to fund Syrian arms purchases.

- Iraq, Syria's bitter rival, refused to join.

Without Iraq's participation, the Front's military strength amounted only to the Syrian Army. The ineffectiveness of any united action was underscored by the failure of any Arabs except the Palestinians to challenge the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in March.

Syria's Peace Terms

Despite its opposition to Sadat's peace moves, Syria remains committed in principle to a peace agreement with Israel, and is thus not in the "rejectionist" camp with Iraq, Libya, and extremists Palestinian groups.

Syria's terms are the toughest of any of the Arab "confrontation" states bordering Israel, however.

The Syrians are adamant about recovering all of the Golan Heights. They are absolutely unwilling to negotiate any modifications in the pre-1967 border and demand complete removal of Israeli settlements on the Heights.

In exchange for an Israeli pullback, the Syrians have said they will accept limited demilitarization of the Golan if an equal portion of the Israeli border region is also demilitarized. Syria would accept UN peacekeeping forces. Assad is probably willing to negotiate the timing and phasing of an Israeli withdrawal as long as Israel acknowledges the principle of a restoration of Syrian sovereignty.

The Golan, however, is not the main

issue for Syria. As Assad told an interviewer in 1977, "Golan is peripheral, Sinai too. The Palestinian problem is the gut issue." Assad will never accept any peace settlement that does not significantly address the Palestinian issue.

In part, this commitment reflects the Syrian's belief that the Palestinian cause is a just struggle, but domestic politics also plays a role. Syria has 300,000 Palestinian refugees—a significant political force in a nation of 6.5 million. The 500,000 Palestinians in Lebanon are another important concern to Assad, given his belief that Lebanon's stability is essential to Syrian security.

While he has never advanced a clear Syrian proposal for the Palestinian problem, Assad has endorsed the concept of a Palestinian state composed of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, provided the arrangement satisfies a majority of Palestinians. He has said that he would also accept a political link between the West Bank and Jordan if both sides want it. The Syrians have rejected both the Israeli and Egyptian proposals for the West Bank as insufficient.

Assad's statements on Jerusalem call for Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 war lines, but he would probably follow Saudi Arabia's lead on this issue. As a member

of the minority Alawite sect, Assad would want the blessing of the Sunni Muslims in Saudi Arabia to sell a Jerusalem solution at home.

Syrian Concessions

In return for Israeli concessions on the Golan and Palestinian issues, Assad is willing to offer an end to the state of war with Israel and a formal peace treaty, but very little more.

Assad rejects the concept of normalizing relations with Israel as part of a settlement. He argues that diplomatic recognition and trade are not legitimate subjects for peace negotiations. Ideally, he would like to sign an accord terminating belligerence and then to ignore Israel.

Assad is probably pragmatic enough, however, to understand that he will have to take some steps toward normalization. He already has allowed meetings between Druze villagers separated by the UN disengagement zone to take place on the Golan Heights. Syria could probably accept other measures such as an end to the Arab boycott of Israel and firms that deal with Israel, and reciprocal notification of military maneuvers near the common border. The Syrian President has left open the possibility of further normalization of relations after a settlement is reached.

Outlook

Assad seems content for now to let Sadat's initiative run its course—confident that it will fail. The situation in Lebanon will preoccupy the Syrians for some time.

The Syrians seem to have begun to prepare for the long haul. They are urging a return to Arab unity, the buildup of Arab military power and renewed preparations for a Geneva peace conference after Sadat abandons his initiative.

Syria may be willing to attend UN-sponsored indirect talks in New York to prepare the way for a Geneva conference.



President Assad of Syria

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Assad discussed this option with UN Secreatry General Waldheim in Damascus on 17 July, and told Hussein that he favors a return to Geneva once Sadat's initiative ends. The crucial issue of Palestinian representation would be a major stumbling block to such meetings.

In the past, the Syrians have insisted that the Palestine Liberation Organization be included in some way—a concept Israel rejects. Assad has been willing to accept a unified Arab delegation to include the PLO as a way around the impasse. Even if the PLO question could be finessed, the

Syrians expect that a Geneva conference will be a protracted process.

As long as Sadat attempts to keep his initiative alive, Syria will continue to remain an outside—and very skeptical—observer of the peace process.