

Approved For Release 2007/03/13 : CIA-RDP79T00975A030400010080-5

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Thursday 1 December 1977

CG NIDC 77/278C

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SYRIA: Asad's Mideast Position

[] Syrian President Asad, by reacting so vehemently against Egypt's latest peace initiatives, is attempting to rally support around himself as the only proper defender of Arab interests. He has not, however, won the widespread sympathy he had apparently expected. Although Asad may be able to obstruct the Egyptian initiative, he is now caught uncomfortably between the moderate and the rejectionist Arab camps--unwilling either to condone the conciliatory attitude of one or to swallow the negative views of the other.

[] The confusion over who is to attend today's scheduled summit of radical Arabs in Libya is symptomatic of Asad's inability to line up a convincing array of Arab followers. Asad initially seized on the meeting--which was conceived by Libya as an effort to bring Syria and Iraq together in a front of radical Arabs opposed to peace negotiations--as a vehicle to facilitate his leadership of a bloc of Arabs opposed to Egypt's initiatives.

[] Asad expected initially that by denouncing Egyptian President Sadat's visit to Israel and by permitting Syria's press to call for Sadat's overthrow, he would generate support for Syria's position among both radicals and more responsible Arab states, like Saudi Arabia and Jordan. He has not wholly succeeded.

[] Although all Arab states share to varying degrees Asad's fears that Egypt will negotiate further bilateral agreements with Israel, Syria has not been able to count on the full backing of any of its allies except the Palestine Liberation Organization.

[] Despite Syria's virulent propaganda attacks on Sadat and its rejection of Sadat's invitation to a pre-Geneva preparatory conference in Cairo, the Syrians have been careful not to say anything that would prejudice their claim to a role in peace negotiations. Even Asad's cooperation with Libya in attempting to arrange a radical summit has been couched in terms of rejecting not negotiations, but only Sadat's way of negotiating.

[] Asad is clearly playing a double game for now, trying to keep a foot in both the moderate and the radical Arab camps. So far, this has not been a happy position, but his alternatives are even less attractive.

[] Throwing in with the radicals on their terms--accepting, for instance, Iraq's demands to renounce peace negotiations--would commit Asad, before he is ready, to closing off an option in which he still has an interest. Aligning himself with Egypt now, on the other hand, would demand more in the way of lost face than Asad is ever likely to concede and more in terms of concessions to Israel than he is probably prepared or politically able to give.

[] Asad will thus probably try to straddle the two positions for as long as he can. If his position is a precarious one, he no doubt takes comfort from the fact that Sadat's is even more so and from the realization that he will not be hurt seriously by letting Sadat take the lead for now. If Sadat clearly fails, Asad can more readily step in to assume the role of Arab leader; if Sadat's gamble succeeds, Asad can later, with little embarrassment, jump back on the negotiating bandwagon.

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IRAQ: Summitry and Rejectionism

[] *Iraq's call for an Arab summit meeting to be held next week in Baghdad is in part an attempt both to force Syria to oppose negotiations with Israel and to discredit President Asad. Iraq has sent Asad an invitation to attend the Baghdad summit--described as an attempt to reconcile Arab differences and unify the rejectionist states and the Palestinians--but the terms Iraq would impose on a Syrian acceptance and reconciliation are probably unacceptable to Asad.*

[] Iraq's initial reaction to Egyptian President Sadat's peace initiatives was to condemn him as a traitor and call for his overthrow, but the emphasis shifted this week to a challenge of Syria's motives and sincerity in opposing Sadat. The Iraqi press on Tuesday warned of a new conspiracy aimed at isolating Egypt from the Arab world and asserted that Syria was using Egypt to prepare the way for its own separate peace with Israel.

[] Iraq is reminding its fellow rejectionists that Syria has been a participant in formulating previous negotiation strategies and has yet to embrace the rejectionist positions of no peace, no negotiations, and no recognition of Israel. Iraq is probably insisting now, as it has during previous discussions on rapprochement with Syria, that Damascus renounce reconvening the Geneva peace talks and any negotiations with Israel.

[redacted] It is not clear at this time whether Syria or the other states and organizations invited to the counter-summit in Baghdad (Algeria, Libya, South Yemen, and various moderate and radical Palestinian factions) will attend.

[redacted] Asad's going to Baghdad would be interpreted by the Iraqis as a Syrian admission of Iraq's pre-eminence in the rejectionist movement. Iraq has long vied with Syria to be the center of ideological pan-Arabism and the staunchest defender of Palestinian rights in the Arab world. The collapse of moderate Arab peace initiatives and the holding of a summit in Baghdad would confirm those assumptions and enhance Iraq's credentials with the rejectionists and the Palestinians.

[redacted] Iraqi criticism of Egypt, meanwhile, appears to have moderated. According to a Reuter report, officials in Baghdad privately expressed pleasure at Sadat's visit to Israel, feeling it would hasten his downfall and prod the Palestine Liberation Organization to assume a more militant stand.

