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Saudis are playing the quiet mediator

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Washington
While Egypt's dramatic break in diplomatic relations with five Arab countries is getting the headlines, even more significant developments may be occurring, behind the scenes, in Saudi Arabia and in Israel.

Diplomatic reports reaching Washington indicate that the Saudis, who are the principal financial backers of many of the Arab states, are playing a quiet but important mediating role among the divided Arabs — a role that complements American diplomatic efforts.

The Saudis' initial reaction to Egyptian President Sadat's opening to Israel had been negative. They resented Mr. Sadat's failure to consult with them in advance before making his precedent-shattering trip to Israel. But over the past week or so, the Saudis seem to have gained a better understanding of what the Egyptian President was trying to accomplish. In the words of one informant: "They are now playing a more positive role."

The Saudis' efforts to urge moderation and bring the Arabs together for a peace settlement could come to nothing, however, if indications that Israel will continue to take a hard line with the Egyptians materialize.

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There is considerable debate in Israel at the moment as to how the Israelis should respond to President Sadat's gestures toward recognition of Israel and its right to exist in peace.

Labor Party politicians, out of power now, are urging a more flexible line, particularly on the Palestinian question. But it is by no means clear that Prime Minister Menahem Begin and his advisers will respond to such internal pressures.

Ephraim Evroni, director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, recently told Mark Bruzonsky, an associate editor of Worldview magazine, that he refused to "accept the concept of a 'Palestinian national existence' or even of a 'Palestinian identity.' Instead, he insisted that there is only a Palestinian Arab problem to be solved within the framework of Israeli sovereignty over all of the West Bank, the occupied territory west of the Jordan River.

If Israel persists in this attitude in talks with Egypt and the United States in Cairo Dec. 13-14, it might undermine President Sadat and exacerbate the divisions in the Arab world that resulted from Mr. Sadat's visit to Israel.

The United Nations will send an observer to the Cairo meeting. One of the key Arab states, Syria, has refused to attend.

At a press conference in Washington Dec. 6, U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance said he hoped that the Cairo conference might come up with a "framework" that would set forth agreements on substantive matters essential to a peace settlement between Israel and all of the Arab states.

The secretary said he hoped there could also

be agreement on the major procedural issues that have blocked the way to a reconvened Geneva conference on the Middle East.

Mr. Vance thus put the United States in line with Egypt's strategy, which seems to be to reach agreement with the Israelis on a framework for peace — namely the principles that would govern a peace agreement — and then to present this to the other Arabs for further negotiation.

'Circles' view

One American official put it in terms of concentric circles. In the smallest circle, Egypt and Israel would negotiate the framework. Jordan and "moderate" Palestinians might join the next circle. Syria would come in at a later stage, in the outer circle.

At his press conference, Mr. Vance seemed eager to dispel the impression that the United States was reluctant in its support for President Sadat's initiatives and for the Israeli response to them. Mr. Vance, who will be flying to the Middle East next weekend on a six-day, six-nation trip, issued a statement at the outset of the news conference that said President Carter wants to be sure all the Middle East leaders fully understand that the present Egyptian-Israeli initiatives have the "full support" of the United States.

Mr. Vance said that President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin "have broken through psychological barriers which have impeded progress toward peace in the Middle East for three decades. As a result, an irreversible process has begun."