

# Israeli-Syrian showdown or brinkmanship diplomacy?

by Thierry Lalevée

For the third time since the beginning of the year, military tension between Israel and Syria is running high enough that talks of a September or October war are being heard in most Middle Eastern and Western capitals. Twice at the end of 1985 and in the spring of 1986, the threat of war was defused with the activation of the hot-line between Moscow and Washington.

Testing Israeli reactions, Syria had engaged from November 1985 on in a strange kind of ballet, deploying and withdrawing at will its SAM 6 and SAM 8 batteries in Lebanon and at Syria's borders with Lebanon. In November 1985, two Syrian MiG-23s were shot down by the Israelis over the Bekaa valley in Lebanon. By the following month, Syria was receiving deliveries of the SAM-5 missiles from Moscow.

At the roots of the present crisis are several political and military considerations. Militarily, Syria, whose avowed purpose has been to "reach strategic parity with Israel," in the words of Syrian President Hafez Assad, did reach new stages of development. It is now able to man and deploy a whole range of surface-to-surface missiles, such as the antique Scuds or Frogs, supposedly updated, but especially the more modern SS-21 middle range missile.

In a numerical comparison between military capabilities in Lebanon, Damascus has a 3 to 1 advantage, and has some 4,200 troops over Israel's 3,600. But this is not considered a serious threat for an Israeli army which has already fought against three Arab armies at once on several fronts.

Israeli military sources and reports from *Jane's Defense Weekly* also indicate that the Israeli army has by now enough experience in electronic warfare, that should Syria deploy its SS-21 against Israeli northern cities, it would encounter a few surprises.

## Syria's new military capability

Militarily, the threat comes rather from a new development. By mid-July, Israeli specialists had rung the alarm bell on Syria's ongoing development of chemical weapons. According to Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Yitzak Rabin, the Syrians are developing the kind of devices which could be fitted in the warhead of the SS-21.

This was described on Aug. 18 as a very "tangible threat" by Brig.-Gen. Yosef Eyal of the Engineers Corps, and by Defense Minister Rabin.

Eyal elaborated that IDF units are equipped to fight such a chemical war, and have been trained to do so ever since the introduction of such weapons into the Iran-Iraq war. However, Rabin pointed out that, though Syria's SS-21 could not "accurately reach such cities as Tel Aviv," it could reach other cities in the North. According to Israeli military sources, Syria's operational capabilities to use chemical weapons, could become the real *casus belli*.

Additionally, it was announced on Aug. 15 that the Soviet Union had begun its deliveries of the very advanced MiG-29 jetfighters. Syrian pilots have been trained in the Soviet Union for over a year on how to handle these sophisticated planes, which represent a real threat to the Israeli Air Force, made up of French and American fighters.

The arrival of these MiG-29s is the latest piece of the puzzle to enable Syria to concretize its war aims. For over a year, through one military maneuver after the other, the Syrian army has been systematically restructured to face a blitzkrieg type of war from Israel, as it beefed up its military presence in the Golan Heights—deploying several dozen T-72 tanks.

While Syria, despite its economic crisis, has been able to spend more than 55% of its Gross National Product for its arms buildup, Israel's army has suffered drastic cuts. In a review of the Israel Defense Forces' status over the period 1986-96 which began in August, Israeli military specialists warned that "because of the Gramm-Rudman amendment," Israel's army could be in an even weaker state in 10 years than now.

The analysis underlined that U.S. economic and military aid should be expected to decrease, with obvious political consequences for the American-Israeli relationship which was strengthened when Vice-President George Bush announced in late July that Israel would receive the NATO-type "most favored nation status." The military strengthening of Assad in Syria and the decline of Israeli forces as a result of the Gramm-Rudman treatment may lead the Israeli government to draw the proper conclusions.

Meanwhile, Israeli military and political leaders are following with great interest the events in Lebanon and the renewed shelling across the borders to northern Israel. Between Aug. 10 and 14, Israeli air forces intervened three times against Palestinian bases, notably in the Bekaa—interventions which aimed both at attacking the Palestinians, and at testing the readiness of Syria's anti-aircraft defense.

Israeli sources connected to former Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, who expects to be the number two in Shamir's government in October when the Likud party leader takes over as premier under the rotation agreement with Peres, have expressed "dismay" at the inability of Hafez al Assad to impose the "Pax Syriana" in the country. They argue that Israel and Syria have a common aim in Lebanon: to rid the country of any Palestinian, especially PLO, influence. Syria's recent defeats in Lebanon mean that the PLO is back in the country.

Syria's inability to eliminate the Palestine Liberation Organization, so runs the argument, is a danger to Israel, which should be prepared to act! The political clout behind such arguments is Sharon's longstanding negotiating deal with Moscow and Damascus to exchange Lebanon for the Golan, which he would have recently discussed again with Soviet officials during an early August trip to Turkey.

Moscow itself has left no doubt that, behind the Helsinki

talks, its intention is to reach just such a deal.

To do so, Sharon and Company are once again prepared to sacrifice the Lebanese Christians, even though they are telling them just the opposite. However, this is far from evoking unanimity inside Israel, where many consider the continued existence of an independent anti-Syrian Christian movement as a matter of Israel's national security.

Israelis won't interfere in Lebanon to reestablish the pre-1975 situation, but they will consider any Syrian attempts at taking over the eastern part of Beirut, as near to being a *casus belli*, too.

Damascus did receive the message and has moved cautiously, using its usual tactic of divide and rule within the Christian camp, and of terror through car-bombs. However cautious he is, Assad is expected to make a mistake, as he cannot tolerate too long this embarrassment to Syrian prestige.

If he does so, he will gamble his future, despite his attempts at reconciliation with several Western countries. Israel's Prime Minister Shimon Peres is himself in no hurry to consider such a war; the momentum of his surprise summit at Ifrane with Morocco's King Hassan, and his upcoming summit with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, are priorities. Though Syria is totally isolated in the Arab world, a war could adversely affect the regime of President Mubarak.

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