

# Gathering Mideast storm

In the next two weeks, the world could be facing the most dangerous superpower confrontation since the Cuban missile crisis. Much will depend on how President Ronald Reagan handles the rapidly escalating crises in Syria and Lebanon.

Last weekend, Syria fired on U.S. reconnaissance planes overflying its positions in Lebanon and, according to some reports, over Syria proper. The Syrians insist these flights were being used to target increasing Israeli air strikes on their positions.

In response, the U.S. launched heavy air strikes on Syrian missile sites in the Shouf mountains. Two U.S. strike bombers were shot down. Druze gunners above Beirut then shelled the airport, killing eight more U.S. Marines. American naval units reacted by intensive shelling of Lebanese and Syrian gun positions in the mountains.

Reagan must now decide how to respond. In light of the new U.S.-Israeli military alliance, and Reagan's evident decision to back Israel to the hilt, the likely outcome is joint air strikes by both nations against Syrian positions in Lebanon.

## Russians in Syria

But, given the limited area of the battle zone, it is likely that air action will intrude on Syria's borders. There are now some 5,000 Russian troops in Syria manning SAM-5, SAM-6, and SAM-9 anti-aircraft missiles. These troops were sent to bolster Syria after the 1982 war, when Israel shot down 102 Syrian aircraft and destroyed over 20 missile batteries for the loss of one plane.

U.S. attacks on Syria could easily involve a clash with the Russians who have, so far, been keeping a very low profile. Russia simply does not have the ability to lend active military support to Syria short of sending its ground and air units across warring Iran and Iraq or across Turkey, a member of NATO and foe of Moscow.

There are now persistent reports out of London and Paris that a major U.S.-Israeli attack on the Syrians is imminent. Already heavily outnumbered and outgunned by Israel, Syria could not hope to resist combined forces of the new allies.

Such an attack could either be designed to drive the Syrians out of central Lebanon or, on a broader scale, could duplicate the original plan of Israel's Ariel Sharon during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. This plan, aborted under American pressure, called for a two-pronged attack on the Syrians through the Bekaa Valley and across the Golan Heights, a giant armored pincer movement designed to encircle and crush the bulk of Syria's army that is concentrated in Lebanon and about Damascus.

Adding fuel to this growing crisis are the stream of reports from Damascus of the grave illness or incapacitation of Syrian President Hafez Assad. Reported to have suffered a major heart attack or stroke two weeks ago, Assad is said to be no longer in control of the Syrian government.

A severe power struggle may now be occurring in Damascus between the two leading rivals: Assad's younger brother, Rifaat, and Defence Minister Gen. Mustapha Tlass. Rifaat Assad, a man noted for his

**ERIC  
MARGOLIS**



erratic behavior and extreme views, may come out on top. His command of the powerful, armored Presidential Brigade in Damascus gives him possession of the capital and he has strong support in the air force. Gen. Tlass, a more moderate figure by comparison, has broad army support but now lacks the armored units in Damascus with which to seize power.

There is also a significant possibility that Syria could dissolve into civil war. The minority Alawites of northern Syria, to whom the Assads belong, are no more than 17% of the population. Yet they dominate the government, the air force and key army units. For the past five years, a bloody struggle has been going on in Syria between these ruling Alawites, the majority Sunni Muslims and the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood.

A power struggle in Damascus could not only plunge the nation into chaos but it might also incite Syria's bitter enemy, Iraq, to launch a surprise attack on the capital aimed at installing a pro-Baghdad regime.

Compounding these crises, Iran now appears close to making good on its threat to cut off oil supplies to the West by closing the Straits of Hormuz. Should it do so, an American carrier battle-group off the Persian Gulf is ready to reopen this vital waterway. While Iran could not respond effectively to such a move, Russian strike aircraft based in southern Afghanistan are now within range of the Gulf.

## Gulf in jeopardy

Iran is also a close ally of Syria and might well attempt to shut the Gulf or attack Saudi oil installations in support of its beleaguered friend.

American-Israeli military action against Syria could also ignite a major conflagration across the Arab world, threatening the U.S.-supported regimes of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. If the rulers of these nations take no action against an U.S. attack on Syria, they may well face attempted coups from their own armies. U.S.-owned oil installations in Arabia would, in this scenario, become a prime sabotage target.

How will the Soviet Union react? Beirut is less than 700 miles from Russia's southern border. An American-Israeli attack on Syria might well be viewed by Moscow in the same way as a Russian-Cuban invasion of Mexico. Given the growing tension between Washington and Moscow and the reported ascendancy of the Soviet military during the illness of Yuri Andropov, some forceful Russian action may well be expected if Reagan decides to expand his military pressure on Syria.

*(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)*