

Old biblical foes are at it again

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Spring is in the Mideast air. The ground along the Israeli-Syrian border, made sodden by melting winter snows, has dried out and is ready for tanks. In southern Lebanon's Bekka Valley, hashish is budding among dug-in guns. And those old biblical foes, the Israelis and Syrians, are once again girding their loins.

Thumping the war drums is an annual rite. Every spring Israel "discovers" a new military threat from Syria and makes a big fuss. The Syrians, not to be outdone, growl about liberating the Golan Heights that Israel seized in 1967. This year, more than gasconading is involved. Powerful forces in the Reagan administration and in Israel are urging that Syria be given a good beating.

Israel claims that Syria was behind the recent attempt in London to blow up one of its 747 airliners and would like revenge. Equally important, Israel's military has a proven policy of trying to smash Syrian military power every few years in order to prevent Syria from ever becoming too strong. Some administration hawks in Washington, elated by the cheap, popular victory over Libya, now want to use Israel to bash Syria and, indirectly, Damascus' allies in Moscow and Tehran. A blow against Syria may, it is claimed, topple President Assad and reduce his nation to chaos.

Syria, for its part, wants Golan back at almost any price. No Syrian regime can tolerate the situation where Israeli guns on Golan are within range of Damascus. Yet the Syrians are also painfully aware that they—even with all the other Arab states—could not possibly defeat Israel in battle. The best Syria can hope

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for is a short, limited military success that will give Israel a nasty jolt.

Syria's tough 270,000-man army, with 4,200 tanks and much artillery, is a redoubtable force when fighting on the defensive. But, as the 1973 and 1982 wars showed, on the offensive the Syrians are deficient in leadership, mobility, co-ordination, logistics and tank gunnery.

In the air—the key element in any Mideastern fighting—Syria is hopelessly outclassed by Israel. During air battles in June, 1982, 80 Syrian jets were downed without Israeli loss in air combat. Today the superb Israeli air force, probably the world's best, is at least one generation ahead of the Soviet-equipped Syrians. The Syrian air force simply lacks the integrated electronic battle management system, veteran pilots, modern aircraft and the deadly missiles that give the Israelis such an overwhelming advantage.

In the open, treeless hills of Golan and southern Lebanon, Syrian armored forces, in spite of heavy anti-aircraft defences, would be clawed to pieces by Israeli air strikes and then enveloped by fast-moving Israeli armor. A pitched battle on Golan or before Damascus could see half of Syria's army annihilated.

Israel, too, has an Achilles heel—its economy. Each day of high-intensity Mideastern combat costs Israel between \$1-\$1.5 billion (U.S.). A week's fighting, no matter how victorious, threatens to shatter Israel's fragile economy, bringing raging inflation, tax increases and balance of payments woes.

Every recent war fought by Israel has been followed by a grave economic crisis. Without fail, the U.S. Congress has provided Israel with extra millions to cover its war costs. But now, with serious Gramm-Rudman budget-cutting taking hold in Washington, Israel may no longer be able to count on limitless post-war credit from the U.S.

Here we have an interesting paradox. Israel cannot be militarily defeated and yet it cannot win any war in an economic sense. Since Israel cannot hope to gain decisive victories over its Arab foes—short of vaporizing them with nuclear weapons—all the Arabs have to do is keep chipping away at Israel by small, short, expensive little wars. To win such little wars, Syria need only keep its regime and some of its armed forces intact. Israel, by contrast, has to find \$10 billion or so after each fight.

The hawks in Washington and Jerusalem who are itching to see Israel tear apart the unloved Syrians should pause and reflect on the nature of super-expensive modern hi-tech warfare. Fight now, pay later could mean financial ruin for Israel's consumers and businessmen. So it could well be the gloomy accountants, rather than the politicians or generals, who decide whether there will be war or peace this Mideast springtime.