

# Syrians brace for war

Spring this year brings two important events to Lebanon's strategic Bekaa Valley: The blossoming of the hashish crop and new preparations for war between Israel and Syria. Recent troop movements on both sides and intensive Israeli military construction activity both point to a possible resumption of fighting, now that the melting of winter snows again makes armored warfare possible.

Virtually all military sources report that Israel is busy building a series of military bases, command centres, airstrips and tank depots in southern Lebanon. Israel's 30,000 troops in Lebanon have been put in a state of combat readiness, as have her forces on the occupied Golan Heights. New Israeli armored formations are being positioned in southern Lebanon and provided with extensive arms.

## Steady flow of Soviet arms

The Syrians have been actively strengthening their defensive positions in the Bekaa and are making a limited call-up of reservists. Syria is receiving a steady flow of Soviet arms and now, for the first time, some of the estimated 4,000 Russian advisers in that country are manning a new air-defence system based around the long-range SAM-5 missile which is designed to shoot down Israel's highly effective airborne radar planes. Both the Russians and Syrians are clearly determined to avoid a repeat of last summer's debacle when the Israelis shot down over 80 Syrian aircraft without a single loss of their own.

Many diplomats and the U.S. administration are obviously worried that another clash is imminent. Tel Aviv's increasingly frequent claims of the danger posed by the Russian advisers in Syria and her threats to expel the Syrians from Lebanon are being taken very seriously in Washington and Damascus. In the past, such assertions have often been a prelude to Israeli military action. U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz is now busy trying to head off such a clash by making another attempt to negotiate a mutual troop withdrawal from Lebanon. He will be in for a most difficult time since the Syrians and PLO will not withdraw until the Israelis leave and Israel will not depart until the Syrians and PLO decamp.

Israel's intense military activity and the construction of permanent bases in southern Lebanon costing tens of millions of dollars would seem to indicate that she has no intention of withdrawing in the near future. Instead, many military analysts believe that Israel may be considering the plan long urged by her general staff to decisively crush and eliminate the Syrian army. Such a campaign was narrowly prevented by American pressure during last summer's invasion of Lebanon.

The bulk of Syria's armed forces are concentrated around Damascus and the Golan Heights front with Israel: The Syrian capital is today within artillery range of Israeli guns. Israeli mechanized forces in the Bekaa Valley are positioned alongside and above the right flank of these main Syrian deployments. A lightning Israeli armored thrust up the Bekaa, punching through the 20,000 Syrian

**ERIC  
MARGOLIS**



troops deployed in that area, could sweep around northeast of Damascus and completely encircle Syria's main forces. Syria's troops would be caught between the Israeli forces on the Golan Heights and the armored units cutting into their rear. Given almost total Israeli air superiority, the Syrians would face certain humiliation.

The destruction of Syria's armed forces in one cataclysmic battle has long been the goal of Israel's military planners. Skilled tanks crews, gunners and officers cannot easily be replaced — it could take up to six years for Syria to field another competent fighting force. By crushing Syria, Israel would remove the last Arab military force capable of offering any armed resistance: The Egyptian army is in shambles, Iraq is hopelessly bogged down fighting Iran, Jordan's forces have no offensive capability and all of the other Arab states are military midgets. Destroying the Syrian armed forces would give Israel unchallenged military and political superiority in the Middle East and, according to the views of many Israelis, allow her to consolidate her hold on the occupied West Bank, Golan and Gaza once and for all.

## Russians respond cautiously

The Syrians are unhappily aware of this threat and are apparently demanding more military support from the Russians, knowing full well that only the threat of an American-Russian clash in the event of an Israeli attack would cause Washington to prevent this ominous scenario. But the Russians have responded very cautiously, mindful that there is little they can do short of sending substantial combat forces to Syria, an act that might well trigger American military opposition.

To Israel, now supremely powerful militarily, and holding a major strategic advantage in southern Lebanon, the temptation to decisively smash her biblical enemy, the Syrians, is undeniably tempting, particularly now that the United States is entering election time. The Syrians, without any powerful Arab allies, with part of their army bogged down in Lebanon, and having to increasingly rely on the uncertain support of Moscow are in an unenviable position. The Lebanese, ever the pragmatists, are probably only hoping that they can harvest their hashish crops before the Syrians and Israelis resume fighting.

*(Eric Margolis, a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies writes frequently on international affairs)*