

Syria

Soviets to tip the balance of power?

According to high-level European intelligence sources, Israel is planning to provoke a confrontation with neighboring Syria sometime in the immediate future, using Israeli assets in Lebanon as the trigger. Perhaps for that reason, the Syrian government has begun to put out signals that it is engaged in a major program to upgrade its relations with the Soviet Union in strategic military terms.

Among the possibilities reportedly being discussed are a Syrian-Soviet defense treaty or the placing of a Soviet nuclear defense umbrella over Syria. Many analysts believe that Moscow has already committed itself to send ground forces to Syria in the event of an Israeli attack.

The Beirut newspaper *An-Nahar* reported last week that Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas left on a secret visit to Moscow to finalize these discussions.

In this context, a revealing interview with Syrian Foreign Minister Abdel-Halim Khaddam, published in the Damascus daily *Tishrin*, was reported as follows by *FBIS*:

Q: Syria is facing voluminous challenges on various levels. How do you view the future strategy that could be proposed and what are the conditions necessary to deepen Arab struggle?

A: The situation in the Arab region is complicated due to the imbalance between us and Israel, as a result of the Camp David accords and also as a result of the U.S. change from support of Israel to actual participation in the plots of aggression. This dictates the reestablishment of the balance of power through the introduction of new factors capable of accomplishing this. . . .

We in Syria are discussing the new qualitative factor that must be achieved. We will achieve this factor. Our aim in this is to establish a strategic balance between Syria and Israel. We will exert any effort and will carry out any action that will assist us in achieving this balance. We are looking for a

qualitative factor whose image is clear before us. We are proceeding on the right path, a path we believe will introduce radical changes in the existing balance in the area. . . .

Actually . . . we are thinking of means that will develop our relations with the Soviet Union on a qualitative level, according to which the Soviet Union will give to us as much as the United States is giving to Israel. . . .

Elaborating on the issue raised by Khaddam, Syria's Prime Minister Abdel-Rauf al-Kasm told a Kuwaiti newspaper that Syria has evidence to prove that the United States intervened directly in the 1973 war to tilt the balance against the Arabs:

The Soviet Union can supply us with arms, but we cannot fight the entire United States. In 1973 we did not fight Israel. Had it not been for the airlift Israel would have been eliminated. While 80 percent of the Israeli air force was in the air bombing Damascus and destroying our cities and factories and hitting our army, the Egyptian forces were standing at the Suez Canal. They had the military capacity to go further, but they carried out the orders given to them. . . .

U.S. planes flew direct, without stopping in Israel, to rocket our tanks and armor. We were fighting the United States and not Israel.

This week, according to European reports, Khaddam will meet West German Foreign Minister H.D. Genscher to discuss the upcoming European Middle East policy initiative. Although so far Syria has been skeptical of the Europeans, recently they have shown willingness to explore the possibility of an EEC initiative. A deputy to Khaddam, interviewed in the Syrian press, reported that he was "confident that very soon a European-Soviet initiative on the Middle East will be presented."

Until recently, also, the Syrians had been relatively isolated in the Arab world, at odds with Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. But a recent visit to Damascus and then Baghdad by a top Kuwaiti official was aimed at smoothing over Syrian-Iraqi differences and at least ending the feud between the two countries. Last week the Syrian and Jordanian information ministers held a series of talks in Damascus in an effort to get Jordanian-Syrian relations back on track.

Reportedly, Syria is leery of the Jordanian plan to negotiate for the West Bank on behalf of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Last week, King Hussein traveled to Baghdad to win pan-Arab support for that position, having earlier visited Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Already, the majority of the PLO is prepared to support Hussein's right to negotiate for the Israeli withdrawal from East Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank of the Jordan River.