

## Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

### Countdown to a Syria-Israel clash

*The sabre-rattling of the Soviet client-state, Syria, in no way contradicts ongoing negotiations between Moscow and Israel.*

**T**he crisis over Libya's involvement in the Dec. 27 massacres at the Rome and Vienna airports, has diverted attention from the developing crisis on the other side of the Mediterranean between Syria and Israel. Has this been a mere oversight or deliberate? A glance at last December's events underlines the coordination between northern Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. During that month, the Soviets provoked two major missile crises, first, when they rushed SAM-5 missiles to Libya, meeting the demand Qaddafi voiced during his visit to Moscow in October, and, second, when Syria moved its batteries of SAM-6, SAM-8, and SAM-2s slightly within Lebanese territory. After a few weeks of protest, the SAM-2 batteries were withdrawn to Syria. The SAM-6 and SAM-8 of a more limited range were still within Lebanese territory, to be apparently withdrawn on Jan. 3.

The maneuvering of the Syrian missiles has two aims: a *fait accompli* to tell Israel that Syria could annex Lebanese territory as part of its own battlefield at any point, and a signal to Israel that Moscow could spark war at any time.

Such behavior does not contradict ongoing Israeli-Soviet negotiations. At the peak of such talks, the Israelis shot down two Syrian MiGs, a reminder that Israel intends to keep the military initiative. Taking note, Moscow gave

the green light to Syria to deploy its missiles on Lebanese territory.

Israeli nervousness is growing at the way Moscow has built the Syrian armed forces since 1983. There has been a buildup in manpower, and an upgrading of the Syrian armed forces' technology. According to *Jane's Defence Weekly*, the Syrian troops withdrawn from Lebanon after Israel's own withdrawal, were put through a military training "unprecedented in scope." Today, the Syrian army, like the Soviet army, needs only a short timespan to shift to the offense.

Syria is again massing troops on the Golan Heights, in numbers much larger than the Israelis, whose total forces of 170,000 are also overstretched along the borders with Jordan and Lebanon. According to *Jane's*, "The present military balance allows the Syrians to take the initiative" before the Israelis could mobilize their forces to fight on the Golan. Israel could be expected to lose the Golan in a surprise Syrian offensive and find itself in the uncomfortable position of being shelled from above.

Syria has large armored tank divisions, some 4,200, of which more than 1,000 are the ultramodern T-72 Soviet tanks. Even for its Merkhavas, whose numbers are unknown, the Israeli Chieftains, Centurions, and even the U.S. tanks are no match. U.S. military sources say that besides recent deliveries of T-72, the Soviets have

refitted the older T-64, making most Israeli anti-tank weapons obsolete. Syria has reportedly put more than 250 T-72 tanks at the Golan since mid-December.

Before Syria withdrew its missile batteries from Lebanon, sources were quoted on Jan. 1 in the *Jerusalem Post* warning that the SAM batteries were a challenge: "Failing to react could be seen as a sign of weakness. Assad has called all the shots until now. It is clear around the cabinet table here that the time has come for Israel to take the initiative." This was also a warning of potential retaliations against the rocket attacks, fired from inside Lebanon, against the northern Israeli city of Kyriat Shmona a few days earlier. On Jan. 7, Syrian SAM-6 missiles, with a 30-km range, were fired at Israeli jets patrolling the Bekaa valley. Fired from within Syrian territory, the missiles had no chance of a hit and represented another warning.

On Jan. 4, Soviet official Karen Brutents warned Israel, in an interview to the Kuwaiti paper *Al Watan*: "I would like to remind you that [the Soviet Union] stands by Syria, with whom we have a treaty of cooperation. . . . Syria will not be alone in the face of any Israeli aggression." The warning parallels those uttered by Moscow over the Libyan crisis.

Certain Israeli leaders such as Sharon would not reject a stage-managed war which could end in a *modus vivendi* with Syria and the Soviet Union at the expense of such regional neighbors as Jordan. But anything related to the Golan Heights is sensitive to the Israeli population, and could easily degenerate into an all-out war, which is not yet Moscow's wish. For the time being, Moscow is keeping Syria on its toes to ensure that at any time, war could be unleashed. This very uncertainty, coupled with Syria's sabre-rattling, may in fact lead to war in the short term.