

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Syria's hostage games

The kind of maneuvers coming out of Damascus could lead to war at any time.

Although Syrian President Hafez el-Assad doesn't like too much publicity, he becomes restless as soon as Damascus is not in the news as first item. What matters to Assad is that Syria be universally recognized as the strategic center of the Middle East. So, he shyly accepted a new title offered to him by the French daily *Liberation*, the "Bismarck of the Arab World." Besides accepting honors, Assad has been busy in recent weeks establishing Syria's predominance on the issue of war or peace in the region, and forceably inserting himself into the French hostage crisis.

Since November 1985, when Damascus began playing the game of deploying and redeploying its SAM missile batteries in and out of Lebanon, military tension has been rising between Israel and Syria. The initial deployment coincided with the Soviet delivery of 35 SAM-5 batteries to Libya, and the year-end terrorist massacres at Vienna and Rome airports. Clearly, there is a broader coordination between Moscow, Tripoli, and Damascus, to raise tension in the region.

In early 1986, Syria withdrew the SAM batteries inside its borders. However, it began redeploying a significant force of troops toward the Golan Heights. In mid-February, Assad announced that in answer to "Israel's attempt to annex the Golan," the Syrian people will "extend Syria, to ensure that the Golan is in its center!" Such rhetoric was partly aimed at compensating for Assad's loss of face in Lebanon; his Dec. 28 agreement

between Lebanese factions, which was to have ended Christian power in the country, was successfully fought and blocked by Lebanese President Amin Gemayel and Christian militias.

However, by late February, Syria's military deployment in the region began causing concern in a few capitals. In Washington, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger was quoted on March 10 warning that an Israeli-Syrian conflict would lead to a "superpower conflict." In Israel, Chief of Staff Moshe Levy, whose term had come to an end, was kept on for another year, rather than risk a personnel change affecting the army command. Raising tension further was the early-February kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers in Southern Lebanon. Israeli intelligence soon determined that Syria was responsible, ostensibly in retaliation for the Israelis' January intercept of a Libyan jet carrying the deputy secretary general of the Syrian Ba'ath Party.

A lot of sabre-rattling like this on both sides, as the French daily *Le Matin* explained on March 2, can lead to war at any time, and not just any war, *Le Matin* continued, but a well-planned war whose outcome would be to establish Syria and Israel as the region's only powers.

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To maintain its exclusive control over Lebanon, Damascus was not going to allow direct negotiations between Paris and the Hezbollahi over the hostages to succeed. Assad be-

came worried when, in February, it looked as if Paris was going to give in to the Hezbollahi. Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas was dispatched to Paris, with an offer to mediate in exchange for a large arms shipment. Paris was shocked by Syria's enormous demand. Tlas left Paris on March 3, reportedly angry and dissatisfied.

On March 8, less than two days after the Islamic Jihad had announced the murder of one of the hostages, Michel Seurat, four French television journalists were kidnapped. At first, this was claimed by Islamic Jihad. Then, on March 10, the Jihad denounced the kidnapping as a "rival operation." On March 14, the unknown "Organization of Revolutionary Justice" claimed the kidnapping; investigators began suspecting the truth: Syria's intelligence service was responsible. It was Damascus's unmistakable message that it was the key to the negotiations.

By the middle of that week, Paris had decided to resume negotiations with Damascus on the arms shipment. Mitterrand sent emissaries to Damascus, including a French diplomat and a Syrian businessman and personal friend of Mitterrand, Omrane Adham. Adham is also a long-standing associate of the Syrian intelligence chief and President's brother, Rifaat el-Assad, in business and in intelligence.

Sharing direct physical control of the hostages with Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the Bekaa Valley, Damascus is involved in a power play which it is determined to win. However, on March 13, a car bomb killed 60 in the center of Damascus. On March 18, a large bomb hidden in a truck was defused in front of the SANA newsagency. Syria accused Iraq, but few believed it.

President Assad cannot be too surprised that certain political forces might be seeking revenge.