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A Week in Lebanon

THE SCALE of Israel's response to terrorist attack has now itself become an international issue, obscuring in some quarters the original provocation by Hezbollah guerrillas. And with reason: The Israelis, to protect their own borders, have killed 100 and more Lebanese, purposefully displaced hundreds of thousands and shot up whole villages. The immediate purpose is to put the guerrillas out of business. The avowed larger concept is to create such an immense internal crisis in Lebanon as to finally compel the Arab side—if not weak Lebanon, then strong Syria—to leash Hezbollah. But the operation involves attacks so disproportionate and harsh as to stir misgivings and criticism from the best foreign friends of Israel, including the United States, and even from members of Israel's governing coalition.

The first priority is a cease-fire. Whether it is open or tacit is not so important as that it register a commitment by Syria to contain Hezbollah. This terrorist organization is commonly referred to as a client of Iran. In fact, it lives and acts on the sufferance of Damascus. Its arms arrive from Syria, and its bases sit in the Syria-controlled Bekaa valley. Since it is isolated among Arabs for its radical ideology and opposi-

tion to peace, it simply could not exist in Lebanon without the comforts of Hafez Assad's patronage. In the past, Syria had the Moscow connection that let it resist Israeli pressures and American entreaties to restrain the Lebanon-based guerrillas dependent on Damascus. But with the Moscow connection gone and with Hafez Assad now counting on Washington to help him reclaim the war-lost Golan, new possibilities arise. This is the theory, at any rate.

Whether it works requires momentum to be restored to the Washington-sponsored Middle East peace talks. Clinton administration officials have been clumsy in their attempts to traverse tricky political terrain—slow to identify Syria's link with Hezbollah, for instance. But they still have time to exploit the diplomatic openings provided by the Lebanon disruptions. Syria needs to be coached to tie up Hezbollah. Israel needs to accept that its exposure to guerrilla rockets does not give it an unrestricted right to disrupt Lebanese civilians—or to remain in occupation of southern Lebanon. In the peace talks these understandings can be knit into concrete commitments: Warren Christopher, heading for the area, has his work cut out for him.