

**Middle East**

**ISRAEL**

The governing coalition in Israel rallied behind Prime Minister Begin this week in a show of solidarity following the emergence of sharp public differences with the US over Israel's peace proposals. After gaining a display of unanimity by the cabinet last weekend, Begin orchestrated a strong show of support in the Knesset on 29 March for his negotiating position, and sent Defense Minister Weizman to Cairo to explore prospects for resuming direct negotiations.

Begin doubtless hoped not only to probe Egyptian President Sadat's intentions but also to use the visit to counter criticism from the opposition Labor Party that he has let the chance for peace with Egypt slip through his fingers because of his inflexibility. If so, the move backfired. Sadat took a hard, uncompromising stand, refusing to resume direct negotiations until the Israelis moderate their position.

The Egyptians probably hope their tough line will help generate a serious



*Prime Minister Begin arrives in southern Lebanon*

national debate in Israel over peace negotiations and will drive a deeper wedge between Begin and Weizman, whom they regard as more reasonable. The hard line in Cairo should in fact give the Labor Party further ammunition to use in its effort to place Begin on the defensive. It could also encourage Weizman to renew his challenge to Begin's authority, although the Defense Minister is likely to bide his time for a while after the failure of the ill-conceived power play he made against the Prime Minister last week when he called for a "national peace government" with representation from opposition parties.

Indeed, despite their differences with Begin, few coalition moderates appear prepared at present to back Weizman against Begin and other cabinet hardliners. They regard Weizman's ploy as an embarrassingly inept and ill-timed attempt to push Begin aside in the midst of a serious dispute with the US.

**The Lebanon Problem**

Continuing Palestinian artillery and rocket fire into northern Israel poses a dilemma for Begin. His government is committed to withdrawing its forces from southern Lebanon, and he knows that prolonging their stay can only add to his difficulties with Washington and Cairo. On the other hand, there is little confidence that a UN presence can prevent the fedayeen from infiltrating back into the border area once Israeli forces leave.

The shelling has driven home the point, moreover, that even a buffer zone across the border—the aim of the Israeli incur-

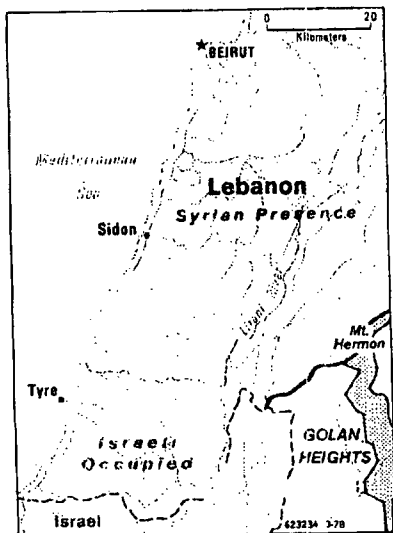
sion—cannot prevent Palestinian strikes against Israeli targets. Criticism has begun to appear in the Israeli press over the actual conduct of the military operation.

More than 1,000 UN peacekeeping troops have arrived in the area—contributed by France, Sweden, Iran, Norway, and Canada. Progress in deploying them between the Israeli and Palestinian positions has been slow. Small UN units now control two of the three Litani River bridges—one occupied only after Israeli forces beat back Palestinian resistance.

The Palestinians have prevented French peacekeeping troops from controlling the third bridge—an important one on the coastal road linking the Palestinian salient around Tyre with the Palestinian-controlled area farther north. The Palestinians insist that the peacekeeping mandate extends only to areas captured by the Israelis, and that peacekeeping units in the vicinity of Tyre are there at Palestinian sufferance.

With that proviso, Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat has promised to cooperate with the UN force. Sporadic firing continues, however, underlining the difficulty even Arafat faces in trying to rein in the Palestinian rejectionists. The Palestinians are divided on the wisdom of cooperating with the UN, but most moderates appear to see tactical advantages in doing so—if only to increase the pressure on Israel to withdraw.

The Israelis, who have generally held to their self-imposed cease-fire, are making clear their growing impatience with the continuing Palestinian bombardments.



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They have withdrawn some of their units from Lebanon, but are keeping most of them in place pending the establishment of a UN buffer. Israeli spokesmen say they expect the process to take several weeks at least.

Syria, which is anxious not to have its occupying force in Lebanon drawn into conflict with the Israelis, moved late last week to stop the flow of Iraqi supplies to the Palestinians via Syria. But the problem of policing the Palestinian-held area north of the Litani River appears no closer to solution.

Despite Israeli reports that three Syrian companies moved several kilometers farther south on 22 March, the Syrians show no inclination to defy the Israeli injunction against expanding in that direction. The concern expressed by the Israelis over so minor a change in Syrian dispositions shows they do not intend to relax their prohibition, however much Syria might share their desire to curb the Palestinians.

