

# More Mideast madness

**P**ARIS — This is the week when Paris is supposed to go into deep coma. The sacred August vacation period has just begun and Paris is fleeing en masse toward the Riviera. The rush south has already left scores dead and over 1,000 people injured in road accidents.

What was supposed for me to have been a quiet week has turned frantic. I've been invited to Majorca for dinner aboard a yacht with a head of state but can't get a flight out of Paris. Every plane is triple-booked. My hosts are trying to arrange for a military aircraft to fly me to Spain.

Meanwhile, the Cambodian peace talks are in full swing here and I'm rushing off to interview the controversial leader of France's right-wing National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen. In the middle of all this comes the frightful business of Lt.-Col. William Higgins, which has just about everyone here reeling in horror.

As of now, no one is certain if the American officer kidnapped in Lebanon has really been executed in retaliation for the kidnapping by Israeli commandoes of the Shia religious leader Sheik Abdul Karim Obeid. We are now waiting to learn if threats made by the shadowy Organization of the Oppressed on Earth to kill hostages Joseph Cicippio and Terry Waite will be carried out. The underground group has said it will execute both men unless Sheik Obeid, who is venerated by Lebanon's Shia Moslems, is freed by Israel.

This latest crises in the seemingly endless round of violence in Lebanon's 14-year-old civil war has raised the question of why Israel chose to kidnap Sheik Obeid now. Israel's explanation is that Obeid was abducted in order to trade him for two Israeli soldiers and a pilot held by Lebanese Shias. A sizable chunk of southern Lebanon, with a large Shia population, is occupied by Israeli troops.

Israel has a long and honorable tradition of moving mountains to secure the release of its captured soldiers. The principal Lebanese groups fighting Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon claim to have seized 18 western hostages and to have killed another eight in retaliation for Israel's bombing and assaults against Shia villages and its kidnapping of Shia leaders. Israel admits to holding at least 60 and has offered to trade them for captured soldiers. Lebanese Shias claim Israel holds hundreds of their followers in prison.

Israel certainly knew that kidnapping Sheik Obeid would provoke a violent response. The pur-

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ported murder of Lt.-Col. Higgins has produced a predictable storm of outrage across the U.S. and Europe and renewed calls for a war against terrorism. It may be no coincidence that this has occurred just when the U.S. has been putting heavy pressure on Israel's right-wing Likud-run government to begin meaningful negotiations with the rebelling Palestinians.

\*For Americans, who have no understanding of the immensely complex situation in Lebanon and who can't tell a Shia from a Libyan, the agony of the hostages makes all Arabs seem like terrorists — just the image Israel tries hard to promote, an effort ably assisted by Lebanon's murderous sects.

Since Likud's rallying cry is "We won't ever negotiate with terrorists," the latest outrage in the Lebanese madhouse short-circuits U.S. efforts to force Israel into talks with the Palestinians.

Lebanon's brutal and fanatical underground groups have played nicely into the hands of Israel's equally militant but much more intelligent far right. This is the way the deadly game of politics goes in the Mideast. Score a major point for Israeli rightists who have at least for the moment scotched Arab efforts to project a moderate image to the world. Call it public relations in which human heads replace press releases.

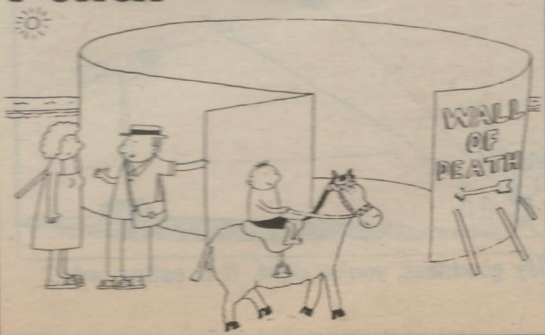
While Israel may have won a tactical victory, the kidnapping of Sheik Obeid will likely prove counter-productive. The U.S. government, including some strong supporters of Israel in Congress, has made no secret of its deep anger over the sheik's kidnapping. Washington rightly fears it has endangered the lives of the eight remaining American hostages in Lebanon.

Obeid's abduction is also being seen in Washington as an effort by Israel to torpedo recent Iranian moves to improve relations with the U.S. Israel's raid may also cause problems for the ten European hostages still in Lebanon and provoke a new crisis between Iran and the western Europeans. The French press is already denouncing Israel's Likud as the "Sorcerer's Apprentices."

The vicious cycle of terror and counter-terror will continue in Lebanon until there is a permanent settlement to that nation's festering civil war. Both Israel and the U.S., which secretly encouraged Israel to invade Lebanon in 1982, bear a heavy responsibility for the horrors now occurring. So do the Syrians and all of Lebanon's warring factions.

As for the Shias of south Lebanon, they see themselves not as terrorists but as fighters against Israeli occupation. Nothing is going to change until Lebanon's little armies are disarmed and both Syrian and Israeli occupation forces withdrawn. Bombing more Shia villages and denouncing terrorism may make westerners feel good but it won't end the madness of Lebanon.

## Punch



"Kids want a bit more excitement these days."