

Hezbollah claimed Lebanon victory

BEIRUT, Lebanon (AP) — Hezbollah guerrillas claimed victory in their fight to oust Israel from southern Lebanon Monday, a day after the Israeli Cabinet voted to withdraw its soldiers from the Lebanese zone they have occupied for 15 years.

In a statement, the Iranian-backed Hezbollah described the decision to withdraw by July as a "historic defeat" for Israel.

"Regardless of whether there is a regional agreement or not, the Zion-

ists' routing from Lebanon without gains was achieved by the resistance and steadfastness of our people and with the strong backing of Arab Syria and Islamic Iran," Hezbollah said.

Israel occupies south Lebanon as a buffer against Lebanese guerrilla strikes on its northern territory. It has been exhausted by nagging Hezbollah attacks within the zone.

The low-level violence there continued Monday as Israel

launched missile attacks on Lebanese targets in response to guerrilla assaults.

Even as Hezbollah celebrated, Syria said Israel's decision to withdraw is meant to cause trouble in the region.

Syria, the main power broker in Lebanon, wants Israel out of the occupied zone but does not want it to withdraw unilaterally.

"Such a formula aims at driving wedges between Syria and Lebanon, singling out Lebanon and

imposing Israeli conditions on it," said Tishrin, an official newspaper that reflects government thinking.

The firm deadline for withdrawal could deny Syria what Israel has said is a major tool in peace negotiations.

Israel said Syria has used the low-level war between Lebanese guerrillas and Israeli forces to pressure Israel to make concessions.

The question now is whether Syria can be pressed into resuming negotiations for the peace needed

to seal the pullback. Israeli Foreign Minister David Peres said the withdrawal decision would test Syria's true intentions.

If Syria is serious about making peace, an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon will expedite a treaty, Peres said.

"If Syria is not serious, and its tactics are to wear us down and keep engaged [in south Lebanon], we will not be hostages to its continued inaction," Levy said.

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