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TRANSCRIPT

BOB SCHIEFFER: Today on FACE THE NATION, rebel forces in Libya retake a town with the help of coalition bombers. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary Of Defense Robert Gates are in our studio to talk about it. And we'll get the latest from Liz Palmer in Tripoli as the unrest continues across the Arab world.

It's all next on FACE THE NATION.

(Crowd protesting)

ANNOUNCER: FACE THE NATION with CBS News chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now from Washington, Bob Schieffer.

BOB SCHIEFFER: And here is the latest overnight. Rebel forces are on the move again in Libya and there has been new violence in Syria. In Libya, rebel forces backed by coalition warplanes took back the key oil towns of Brega and Ras Lanuf. The Qaddafi forces acknowledged that the bombers had forced its troops to retreat. In Syria, the government says twelve people were killed, more than two hundred wounded as protests and demonstrations spread across that country. In Yemen, demonstrators who want their ruler to step down threw shoes as the unrest continued to build there. For more on all of this, we go to our Liz Palmer in Tripoli. Bring us up to speed, Liz.

ELIZABETH PALMER: Well, let's begin in Yemen where the beleaguered President Ali Abdullah Saleh as been unable to quash the demonstrations. He's now been forced to say, okay, I'll go within hours if necessary. But I have to be able to go with dignity. Meanwhile, the security situation is unraveling. And we just heard that Islamic militants have seized a weapons factory in the south of the country. Now over in Syria, where things got very violent last week, Amnesty International estimates fifty-five people have been killed by the security forces in one town alone. Now President Assad has made some concessions to release two hundred and sixty prisoners, for example. But it hasn't worked. We have huge demonstrations again today. Many of them sparked by the funerals of those killed earlier in the week. In Jordan, things are a little quieter. The King though has been forced to offer concessions there to keep the peace, including some measures that would limit his own power. Bob.

BOB SCHIEFFER: And you haven't even brought up where you are in-- in Libya. What's the situation there?

ELIZABETH PALMER: Well, the rebels made a dramatic advance today. They had been fighting for a town called Ajdabiya on the coast for four days. They took it overnight. They swept forward to the next town on the road called Brega. And they say that essentially the Qaddafi-- the pro-Qaddafi forces are in real retreat. Now they were able to take that territory because there was extensive bombing by the NATO and allied planes last night that took out a lot of the pro-Qaddafi heavy armor--the tanks and the heavy guns. It looks as if the pro-Qaddafi forces are retreating to Qaddafi's stronghold of Surt. And the rebels are following but it's pretty clear that they won't be able to take that town without very, very comprehensive and proactive support from the skies. Bob.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, Liz, thank you so much. Liz Palmer in Tripoli this morning.

Good morning again. And we are joined in the studio by the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense. Madam Secretary, let me start with you. Tens of thousands of people have turned out protesting in Syria, which has been under the iron grip of the-- the Assad for so many years now. One of the most repressive regimes in the world, I suppose. And when the demonstrators turned out, the regime opened fire and killed a number of civilians. Can we expect the United States to enter that conflict in the way we have entered the conflict in Libya?

HILLARY CLINTON (Secretary of State): No. Each of these situations is unique, Bob. Certainly, we deplore the violence in Syria. We call, as we have on all of these governments during this period of the Arab awakening, as some have called it, to be responding to their people's needs, not to engage in violence, permit peaceful protest and begin a process of economic and political reform. The situation in Libya, which engendered so much concern from around the international community had a leader who used military force against the protestors from one end of his country to the other, who publicly said things like, we'll show no mercy. We'll go house to house. And the international community moved with great speed in part because there's a history here. This is someone who has behaved in a way that caused grave concern in the past forty-plus years in the Arab world, the African world, Europe and the United States.

BOB SCHIEFFER: But I mean-- how can that be worse than what has happened in Syria over the years, where Bashar Assad's father killed twenty-five thousand people at-- at a lick. I mean, they opened fire with live ammunition on these civilians.

HILLARY CLINTON: Well--

BOB SCHIEFFER: Why is that different from Libya?

HILLARY CLINTON: Well, I--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): This is a friend of Iran, an enemy of Israel?

HILLARY CLINTON: Well, if there were a coalition of the international community, if there were the passage of a Security Council resolution, if there were a call by the Arab League, if there was a condemnation that was universal but that is not going to happen because I don't think that it's yet clear what will occur, what will unfold? There is a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer. What's been happening there the last few weeks is-- is deeply concerning. But there's a difference between calling out aircraft and indiscriminately strafing and bombing your own cities, then police actions, which frankly have exceeded the use of force that any of us would want to see.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Secretary Gates, you have strongly condemned Bashar Assad and said he must learn from Egypt. I think it's fair to say he didn't pay much attention to you.

ROBERT GATES (Secretary Of Defense): Well, that's not a surprise. What I--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Should he step down?

ROBERT GATES: What I said-- what I said in-- when I was in the Middle East was that the lessons should be-- that should be taken from Egypt was where a military stood aside and allowed peaceful protests and allowed political events to take their course. That's basically the lesson that I was talking about with-- with-- with respect to Assad in terms of whether he should

stand down or not. You know, those-- these kinds of things are up to the Syrians, up to the Libyans themselves.

BOB SCHIEFFER: This whole region is in turmoil now. Trouble in Bahrain and Yemen, whose governments have been allies of ours in the fight against terrorism. Now there are demonstrations in Jordan, one of our closest allies in the Arab World. How do we decide which of these countries we're going to help and which ones we're not?

HILLARY CLINTON: Well, Bob, we're trying to help them all. I mean, you know, there-- there is a lot of different ways of helping. We have certainly offered advice and counsel. I think the role that the United States played in Egypt, for example, particularly between our military, between Secretary Gates, Field Marshal Tantawi, between Admiral Mullen and his counterpart, was only possible because of thirty years of close cooperation. So we have to look at each situation as we find it. We don't have that kind of relationship with a country like Syria. We just sent back an ambassador for the first time after some years. And as you recall, you know, the administration decided we needed to do that because we wanted somebody on the inside. The Congress was not so convinced that it would make a difference. Each of these, we are looking at and analyzing carefully but we can't draw some general sweeping conclusions about the entire region.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, let's talk about Libya a little then. We have-- the U.N. resolution is in place. It's established a no-fly zone. NATO is going to take over the operations there. But it does not call for regime change. And the President has said that Mister Mac-- Qaddafi has to go. That seems a bit contradictory.

ROBERT GATES: Well, I don't think so. I think you-- what you're seeing is the difference between a military mission and a policy objective. The military mission is very limited and restricted to the establishment of the no-fly zone and for humanitarian purposes to prevent Qaddafi from being used to his armed forces to slaughter his own people. That's it. And-- and, one of the things that I think is central is you don't in a military campaign set as a mission or a goal something you're not sure you can achieve. And if we've learned anything over the past number of years, regime change is very complicated. And-- and can be very expensive and can take a long time. And so I think the key here was establishing a military mission that was achievable was achievable on a limited period of time and that could be sustained.

BOB SCHIEFFER: There are some people in the Pentagon quoted in-- in various newspapers as saying this no-fly zone may last for three months or so. How long do you think this is going to be in place?

ROBERT GATES: I don't think anybody has any idea.

HILLARY CLINTON: But, Bob, I think it's important to take a step back and put this into context. When the Libyan people rose up as their neighbors across the region were doing and said, "Look, we want to see a transition," it was after forty-two years of erratic and brutal rule. Qaddafi's response was to basically not just ignore but to threaten and then to act on those threats. Our-- our country along with many other countries were watching this unfold. The United States Senate passed a resolution calling for a no-fly zone on March 1st. As, Bob reminded everybody, there's a difference between calling for it and actually enforcing it. When the Security Council in a really stunning vote of ten to five--ten-four, five abstentions said, look, take all necessary measures to fulfill this mission of protecting the Libyan people. It was a mission that the United States, of course, was going to be in the forefront of because of our

unique capabilities. But look at the coalition of European, Canadian, Arab countries that have come together to say, we're going to make sure that we protect these civilians. The military mission is not the only part of what we're doing. We have very tough sanctions that are ferreting out and freezing Qaddafi and Qaddafi family assets. We have a lot of diplomats and military leaders in Libya who are flipping, changing sides, defecting because they see the handwriting on the wall. We have an ongoing political effort that is, you know, really just picking up steam to see if we can't persuade--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): So--

HILLARY CLINTON: --others convince Qaddafi to leave. So, you know, we see the plans going up, but that is just the piece of an overall strategy.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Well, do you think it's going well then--

HILLARY CLINTON (overlapping): Oh, I think it's going--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): I mean would you give it good marks so far?

HILLARY CLINTON (overlapping): --I think it's going very well.

ROBERT GATES: I think the military mission has gone quite well. I think we have been successful a lot. You know, there was never any doubt in my mind that we could quickly establish the no-fly zone and suppress his air defenses, but I think what has been extraordinary is seeing a number of different countries using their combat aircraft in a way to destroy some of his ground forces that really involves an extraordinary discrimination of targets. And, you know, I push back when I was in Russia last week against the comments that both Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev made about civilian casualties. The truth of the matter is we have trouble coming up with proof of any civilian casualties that we have been responsible for. But we do have a lot of intelligence reporting about Qaddafi taking the bodies of people he's killed and putting them at the sites where we've attacked. We have been extremely careful in this military effort. And-- and not just our pilots but the pilots of the other coalition air forces have really done an extraordinary job.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): He is taking bodies and putting them in places--

ROBERT GATES (overlapping): We have a number of-- we have a number of reports of that.

BOB SCHIEFFER: In-- in more than one place or?

ROBERT GATES: Yes.

BOB SCHIEFFER: How many places?

ROBERT GATES: Yeah. You know, we just get various reports of it.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you this. There are reports that we may arm the rebels. Is that in fact going to happen?

HILLARY CLINTON: There's been no decision about that. We are in contact with the rebels. I've met with one of the leaders. We have ongoing discussions with them. We've sent both the

ambassador that was assigned to Libya, plus an-- a young diplomat to have this ongoing dialogue with the-- the opposition. But there's a lot of ways that they can assist them. And we're-- we're trying to discuss that with our-- our allies in this effort. And we will be when I go to London on Tuesday.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let me just ask you this. Under this arms embargo--

HILLARY CLINTON: Mm-Hm.

BOB SCHIEFFER: --and the resolution and so forth, could you-- if you decided you needed to do that and wanted to do it, could you do it under the current--

HILLARY CLINTON: Yes.

BOB SCHIEFFER: --resolution?

HILLARY CLINTON: Yes.

BOB SCHIEFFER: You believe you could.

HILLARY CLINTON: Yes. And the-- and the reason is because there is an arms embargo against the Qaddafi regime. That was established in the first resolution, Resolution 1970, which applied to the entire country. In the follow-on resolution, 1973, there is an exception if countries or organizations were to choose to use that.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you this, Mister Secretary, we say it's time for-- for Qaddafi to go. You say that the military part of this, the no-fly zone is going well. But I don't think anybody really believes that this ragtag group of-- of resistance fighters, as brave as they are, could actually topple this man who has these tanks and artillery and that. Do you--

HILLARY CLINTON (overlapping): He has a lot fewer now than he did a week ago.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, I-- exactly. But how is the thing going on the ground? And do you really think that these people could topple him without some kind of help from the outside?

ROBERT GATES: Well, first of all, we-- we prevented him from moving on toward Benghazi. Those forces were destroyed. We have evidence that he's withdrawing from Ajdabiya and-- and back further to the west because we're not only striking his armor, we're striking his logistics and supplies and things like that. And, you know, just to Secretary Clinton's point, you know we have things in our toolbox in addition to hammers.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Mm-Hm.

ROBERT GATES: And-- and so, there are a lot of things that can go on here. His military can turn. We can see-- we could see elements of his military turning, deciding this is a no-win proposition, the family splitting. I mean, any number of possibilities are out there, particularly, as long as the international pressure continues and those around him see no future in staying with him.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, having said all of that, do you think that's what's going to happen here? I mean, can he-- can these people really do this with just some help from--

HILLARY CLINTON (overlapping): Well--

BOB SCHIEFFER: --up in the sky?

HILLARY CLINTON: You know, Bob, I mean, I know how-- how concerned people are and obviously the President will speak to the country Monday night, answer, I think, a lot of those concerns. This-- the Security Council acted a week ago Thursday. The effort to enforce the Security Council resolution is barely a week old. We've already seen quite significant progress on the ground. As Bob just said, we believe based on the intelligence and what our military is seeing, the Qaddafi forces are withdrawing, moving to the west. Yes, this is not a well-organized fighting force that the opposition has. But they are getting more support from defectors, from the former Libyan government military, and they are, as Bob said, very brave, moving forward and beginning to regain--

ROBERT GATES (overlapping): Well--

HILLARY CLINTON: --ground that they lost when Qaddafi, you know was brutalizing them by moving toward Benghazi. So, you know, this is a really short period of time. And any kind of military effort, but I think the-- the results on the ground are-- are pretty and significant.

ROBERT GATES (overlapping): And I just underscored. The military attacks began essentially a week ago, last Saturday night. And-- and don't underestimate the potential for elements of the regime themselves to crack.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right.

ROBERT GATES: And to turn. I mean it isn't just the opposition in Benghazi or whatever.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): So you think his days are limited?

ROBERT GATES: I-- I wouldn't be hanging any new pictures if I were him.

BOB SCHIEFFER: What-- what would be an acceptable outcome? You want him out. But would you be satisfied if the country wound up partitioned or something of that nature?

HILLARY CLINTON: I think it's too soon to predict that. I mean one of the reasons why we are forming a political contact group in London this coming week is because we want to get a unified political approach just as we have forged a unified military approach. And as-- as both Bob and I have said, there are many ways that this could move toward the-- the end state. If you think about what happened in the nineties, you know, it-- it took a while for Milosevic to leave but you could see his days were numbered even though he wasn't yet out of office. And so, there's a lot of ways that this could unfold. What is clear is that Qaddafi himself is losing ground. He has already lost legitimacy. And the people around him, based on all of the intelligence and all of the outreach that we ourselves are getting from those some of those very same people demonstrate an enormous amount of anxiety. And, you know, that-- that will play itself out over time.

ROBERT GATES: Could I-- can I just make a broader point, Bob? We get so focused on these individual countries, I think we-- we have lost sight of the-- of the extraordinary story that is going on in the Middle East. In the space of about two months, we've probably have seen the

most widespread, dramatic change in the tectonic plates, if you will, politically, in that region, since certainly the drive for independence in the fifties and perhaps since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire nearly a century ago. In virtually every country in the region, there is turbulence. And, we are in dark territory. I mean even the changes in Eastern Europe in 1989, took place from a period from February to December-- to November. And-- and so when you think back of what has happened in just two months, this is really an extraordinary challenge for the administration and frankly for other governments around the world, in terms of how do we react to this? How do we deal with this? And-- and I think the key and-- where the-- where the President is trying to establish the principle is here are our principles. Here's what we believe in. But then we'll deal with each country one at a time, because we have to be deal with the specific circumstances. But we can't lose sight of the historic and dramatic nature of what's going on and the fact there are no predetermined outcomes.

HILLARY CLINTON: And there are no perfect options. We-- we are choosing among competing imperfect options. I mean, if we were sitting here and Benghazi had been taken and tens of thousands of people had been slaughtered and hundreds of thousands had fled--some of them over the border to Egypt, destabilizing Egypt during its particularly delicate transition. We'd be sitting here and people in the Congress and elsewhere would be saying, why didn't we do something? So the-- the problem is we are trying to within the broader context of this extraordinary movement toward aspirations that are universal, that people in the Middle East and North Africa are demanding for themselves to support the broader goals but to be very clear about how we deal with individual countries as we stand for our values and our principles but have to take each one as it stands and where it is headed.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, I want to thank both of you for your insights.

HILLARY CLINTON: Thank you.

BOB SCHIEFFER: We really appreciate it.

ROBERT GATES: Thank you.

HILLARY CLINTON: Thank you.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Back in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: Finally today, I've been a reporter for a while. Fifty-four years if you have to know and I cannot recall an overload of news from so many places as we have experienced these past eleven weeks. It began in January with the horrible shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Arizona. But by the end of the month, all that pushed off television and the front pages as Egypt came apart. We wrestled with that story for three weeks until it was pushed aside by those protests by public union employees in Wisconsin. We got New Jersey governor Chris Christie's take on that when he dropped by FACE THE NATION, but he wasn't even out of the studio when the first trouble surfaced in Libya, then came one of history's worst earthquakes followed by a devastating tsunami followed by the nuclear disaster in Japan. And now we're back to Libya and trying to figure out if we've gone to war in yet another Muslim country and whether we'll be asked to play a similar role in Syria and Yemen and who knows where else.

Well, thank goodness we got a little relief from Congress. In case you hadn't noticed they've been here since January, that is, except for three vacation breaks, but they have managed to do exactly nothing. With all the other news, if they had done anything, I don't know when we would have had time to cover it or where we would have put it. But I double-checked, we didn't miss a thing.

Back in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: And that's all for today, stay with your CBS station for the latest on all this. And a reminder, CBS News will have live coverage at 7:30 Eastern Time tomorrow night of the President's address on Libya at the National Defense University here in Washington. We'll see you then and we we'll see you right here next week on FACE THE NATION.