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CBS News

FACE THE NATION

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to the United States

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Syrian Ambassador
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***FACE THE NATION - CBS NEWS
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BOB SCHIEFFER, host:

Today on FACE THE NATION, the Middle East war grows wider and even more dangerous. What is American policy for the region?

The Israeli battle against the terrorist group Hezbollah moved into the 12th day as Israeli war planes continued this morning to pound Lebanon, and guerrillas fired rockets into northern Israel. Secretary of State Rice will leave for the region today. Will Syria stay out of the conflict and move away from supporting Hezbollah, or take the other tack and confront Israel? We'll ask the Syrian ambassador to the United States, Imad Moustapha. How long will Israel maintain the current attack? We'll ask the Israeli ambassador to the United States, Daniel Ayalon. Then we'll talk about the wider implications of this crisis on the whole region with Washington Post writer David Ignatius. I'll have a final word on looking for a little relief from all the bad news in the newspaper of all places.

But first, back to the Middle East on FACE THE NATION.

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

SCHIEFFER: And good morning again. The main news this morning is that the United States says it is open to sending some sort of international peace-keeping force onto the border between Lebanon and Israel. That from administration sources today. On the ground, the war goes on and so we start there.

Our chief foreign correspondent Lara Logan is in northern Israel this morning, right along for the border. For reasons too complicated to explain, we're having to talk to her via the telephone.

Lara, now you just left Haifa a short time ago. Tell us about what happened there, there were more rocket attacks.

LARA LOGAN (CBS News, Chief Foreign Correspondent): Well, the air raid sirens went, and then I counted one after another, 13 big explosions. We went to the scene of one of those, and what is interesting to see is that Hezbollah coming closer and closer to Haifa's oil refinery. That's the most important strategic target in this city.

And what is even more interesting is that most of the attacks on Haifa come from the Lebanese town of Tyre, and that is where Israeli war planes have been hitting over and over again. So this is the kind of message from Hezbollah, that in spite of such heavy bombardment, they're still able to launch attacks on Haifa.

SCHIEFFER: We understand that Israel is still massing along the border. Do you still anticipate a large-scale Israeli ground invasion into Lebanon?

LOGAN: Well, the Israelis don't like the word "invasion" for many reasons,

but primarily they say because they have no intention of occupying Lebanon, or going deep into Lebanese territory, or all the way to Beirut. Their plan is to secure a buffer zone in south Lebanon, and certainly we expect to see more Israeli ground troops going in there over the next few days, no doubt about that. They've already managed to take one strategic village, and there's heavy fighting going on around there at the moment. We can hear the sound of outgoing Israeli artillery thundering around these hills as they battle to hold onto that ground that they've taken, Bob.

SCHIEFFER: Now, we hear from here that Lebanon is saying that if the Israelis do move into southern Lebanon in force, Lebanon may send its army down to oppose them. This morning reports from Syria that Syria might send its troops into Lebanon. What do you make of those reports, Lara?

LOGAN: Well, the Israelis are dismissive of the Lebanese Army. In fact, you know, they wanted the Lebanese Army in south Lebanon instead of Hezbollah, but they recognize that the Lebanese Army is too weak even to do that. So for the first time now you're having Israel saying they would be prepared to accept an international force in south Lebanon led by NATO.

As far as Syria's concerned, it's quite clear that Syria and Israel have both gone to great lengths in public to let everybody know that neither wants to be drawn into this war. So that's seen here more as Syria's politicians speaking to the Arab street as the crisis in Lebanon escalates, and it's believed that behind the scenes in the--in the backroom dealing, Syria is offering to do what it can to bring about some kind of cease-fire, Bob.

SCHIEFFER: Thank you very much, Lara.

Joining us now is Dr. Imad Moustapha. He is the Syrian ambassador to the United States.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you for coming.

Dr. IMAD MOUSTAPHA (Syrian Ambassador to the United States): Good morning.

SCHIEFFER: You heard what Lara Logan reported. There are also reports coming out of Syria this morning that Syria wants to, quote, "engage in dialogues to solve this crisis." Under what circumstances?

Dr. MOUSTAPHA: Of course, since the first moment this crisis has started, Syria has time and again said that we believe that there should be an immediate cease-fire, because the ongoing hostilities are causing an unprecedented amount of death and destruction in Lebanon, particularly to the civilians. The civilians are being killed by the scores, first. Second, we believe that once the cease-fire is attained, then negotiations can start immediately. First, towards an exchange of prisoners; second, towards a comprehensive settlement. Syria really wants a total solution to the Middle East crisis based on security for all parties on returning our occupied territories and allowing the Palestinians to have an independent, sovereign, viable state.

SCHIEFFER: The White House chief of staff, Josh Bolten, said on "Meet the Press" this morning that the administration is looking for some sort of strong showing from Syria that they are willing to do something. What is Syria willing to do to get some sort of talk started here?

Dr. MOUSTAPHA: I think Syria is a major player in the Middle East. And if you remember in the past 30 years whenever there was a crisis, past US administrations would immediately engage with Syria, and we would usually play a constructive, positive role towards alleviating some tension or reaching a settlement or a compromise. This administration has the unique position of not talking to Syria, which was not the case in the past 30 years. If you remember, every US president--starting with Richard Nixon, ending with Bill Clinton--did actually visit Damascus. And add to this the numerous visits of secretaries of states and you will see the difference between past administrations and this administration and how to engage or not to engage with countries in the Middle East.

SCHIEFFER: Well, are you saying that you want direct talks with the United States here?

Dr. MOUSTAPHA: We don't mind this. We always had this before. There is no problem. Whenever the United States claimed that it's time to engage in serious diplomacy--not the sort of diplomacy that has been announced in the past two days--a visit by Secretary Rice to Rome just to tell--just to tell some Arab officials what the United States want them to do--accompanied by expediting intelligence bumps to Israel so that Israel can use them in killing more and more civilians and in destroying more and more of the infrastructure in Lebanon. If the United States wants to involve in serious diplomacy, of course Damascus is more than willing to engage.

SCHIEFFER: Here's what President Bush said yesterday. He said, "For many years, Syria has been a primary sponsor of Hezbollah, and it has helped provided Hezbollah with Iranian-made weapons." Your response to that?

Dr. MOUSTAPHA: Our response to that is the--that the US policy towards the Middle East has been totally hijacked by Israeli policies in the Middle East. Whoever dares--whoever dares to oppose the Israeli occupation and annexation policies in the Middle East immediately be--gets labeled as a terrorist and gets discredited. I think this is the treatment of the US national interests. The Arabs are not the enemies of the United States. The United States should not be flagrantly one-sided in this conflict.

SCHIEFFER: But you don't deny that you have been sponsoring Hezbollah and that you have furnished weapons to them.

Dr. MOUSTAPHA: We don't furnish weapons to Hezbollah because we do not produce weapons in Syria. We support Hezbollah because Hezbollah is a national liberation movement.

Everybody should understand that the issue in the Middle East, the true issue,

is that ongoing Israeli occupation of our territories. Syria has time and again invited Israel to engage in peace talks with us and with the Lebanese and with the Palestinians leading to a comprehensive peace settlement.

SCHIEFFER: Well...

Dr. MOUSTAPHA: Israel has flatly rejected this.

SCHIEFFER: Well, was Hezbollah right to kidnap those Israeli soldiers? Because that's what started all of this.

Dr. MOUSTAPHA: When you say that's what started all of this, it's like the history of the conflict of the Middle East started 10 days ago. The amazing thing is that the American public opinion probably doesn't even know that while Hezbollah has captured and imprisoned two Israeli military soldiers, Israel holds 9,500 Arab civilian prisoners, some of them women and children. And the moment Israel--Hezbollah took those two soldiers, immediately Hezbollah offered Israel an exchange of prisoners, particularly starting with the women and children illegally imprisoned by Israel.

SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you this, there are reports out of Damascus this morning that if the Israelis do launch a massive land invasion into Lebanon, as you heard Lara Logan report, that Syria may send its troops into Lebanon. Is that...

Dr. MOUSTAPHA: This is hypothetical. I hope it will not happen. Syria has only called for an immediate cease-fire. We do not believe that escalating the situation further in the Middle East will lead anywhere. What we are calling for is de-escalation, diplomatic engagement, and for the United States to restart playing the role it used to play in the past, the role of the broker of peace. Right now, if you are an American taxpayer, you are financing what Israel is doing to Lebanon: death and destruction. This is--this is unfair.

SCHIEFFER: All right. We'll leave it there. Mr. Ambassador, thank you.

Dr. MOUSTAPHA: Thank you.

SCHIEFFER: Now we taped that interview just a few minutes ago. Now with us live is the Israeli ambassador, Daniel Ayalon.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you for coming.

Mr. DANIEL AYALON (Israeli Ambassador to the United States): Good to be here.

SCHIEFFER: Well, I must ask your response. The Syrians say they want a cease-fire.

Mr. AYALON: Well, if they want a cease-fire they would just bring about the safe release unconditionally of our two kidnapped soldiers, which are

hostages. And they would bring about stopping all the shelling of Hezbollah. And they would stop shipping all these armaments to Hezbollah, including Syrian-manufactured 220 millimeter rockets, which are really a terror weapon because they have warheads which specifically is designed to kill civilians with ball bearings and shrapnels. This weapon is not good, it's not effective against military, only against civilians. This is what they are using.

SCHIEFFER: Well, you just heard the Syrian ambassador say, number one, we don't furnish weapons to Hezbollah, and number two, we don't help them get weapons. He said, "We don't make weapons."

Mr. AYALON: Well, we have now the unfortunate evidence, as it's rained over our cities and towns, killing scores of Israeli civilians as well. And so we have the evidence, we have the serial numbers, all the manufacturing in Syria and also in Iran.

SCHIEFFER: Mr. Ambassador, how much longer will Israel keep up this attack?

Mr. AYALON: Well, we are not sitting with a time watch, Bob. And it's not a matter of timing, it's a matter of getting the results. And the results should be taking Lebanon and giving it back to the Lebanese. Neutralizing Hezbollah as a terror-fighting force and also bring about the conditions which will be solid for a new political structure in Lebanon, which would really help the entire Middle East. We cannot have Hezbollah hold hostage the Lebanese people, Israelis and the entire region. And...

SCHIEFFER: Well, as he was leaving out in the corridor here, the Syrian ambassador said to me that you have not stopped Hezbollah at this point, really haven't hurt them much in their ability to respond. Do you think you have damaged this, this group as yet? And how much longer do you think it will be before you have basically destroyed them? And I guess that's what you're aiming to do.

Mr. AYALON: Yes, absolutely. We have dealt a real blow to the Hezbollah. There are a few hundreds Hezbollah terrorists who are dead, killed. A lot of the arsenal is gone. Basically the long-range, and here we see Iran and Syria supplying them with long-range--200 miles--missiles, which is very, very irresponsible. We have to understand that Hezbollah, the first time in history that we see a terror organization with state-like capabilities, with strategic weapons and strategic capabilities. So it's not easy, but it's high time to take them out, and we are going to do it, and I think we're making a lot of inroads, and in a few days you will see a totally different situation.

SCHIEFFER: The United States is sort of sending out signals, as it were, that it is now ready to talk about putting an international force in there along the border between Israel and Lebanon. Would Israel favor that?

Mr. AYALON: I believe so. We will certainly not rule it out. We would like to see an effective force which has some capabilities to defend itself and also to bring law and order. We have had this very, very miserable example of UNIFIL which was not able to stop Hezbollah in the country.

SCHIEFFER: Well, Mr. Ambassador, do you think it's going to take another week to have Hezbollah where you want them? Is it going to take two weeks? I mean, you're having an enormous number of civilian--civilian casualties here. And some people believe that--that--that it might, in fact, cause the Lebanese government to collapse. I'm sure that's not what Israel wants.

Mr. AYALON: Not at all. Not at all. And I believe--I cannot tell you it will be a week or two weeks, but we are making progress. And what is important to remember here is that with the Hezbollah, we are targeting only Hezbollah. We are not targeting civilians as they do with our towns in Kiryat Shmona, Tiberias and Haifa. But what is the problem, Bob? There are no Hezbollah camps per se. They're not having Hezbollah positions or stations just out in the field. Specifically they locate them in heavily populated areas, which makes us work much slower, because what we're trying to do is separate the civilians with the terrorists. We send them messages, throwing leaflets to prewarn them, also at the expense of compromising our missions, because the Hezbollah also gets the prewarning. So it's not going to be a very quick-fix war. But we are being very effective and I believe that at the end we will see a situation whereby Lebanon and the Lebanese Army will be once and for all stronger than the Hezbollah and we'll be able to take Lebanon and its sovereignty back to the government.

SCHIEFFER: Is Israel going to move into Lebanon in force, Mr. Ambassador?

Mr. AYALON: No. You will not...

SCHIEFFER: On the ground?

Mr. AYALON: No. What we're doing now in southern Lebanon is really mopping up, mop-up operations against these fortifications of the Hezbollah, which was right smack-dab against our borders, allowing them to kidnap our soldiers and to attack us. So we're trying to throw them, repel them out of the borders. You will not see divisional columns pouring into Lebanon. It's going to be in-and-out operations, and we're not going to stay in Lebanon, not at all.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Thank you very much Mr. Ambassador.

We'll be back to talk to David Ignatius of The Washington Post in just a moment.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: And we're joined now by David Ignatius, who is a columnist for The Washington Post, and someone who has followed this story for years.

David, I ask you to just simply listen to these two ambassadors this morning and tell us what you make of what they said.

Mr. DAVID IGNATIUS (Columnist, The Washington Post): Well, I--first, the Syrian ambassador was telling us that Syria would love for the United States

to come talk to Syria, or to be involved in this diplomacy. But when you asked him what specifically would Syria be prepared to offer, he was very careful, didn't really give a good answer. That tracks what I'm hearing from State Department officials, who say, yes, they're getting indirect messages that Syria would like to be part of this process, but when you boil down the message, it's just 'Come talk to us.'

I thought the Israeli ambassador said something very important at the end, when you asked him about the prospect for an Israeli ground invasion. We've had pictures on television now for the last three or four days of tanks massing along the Lebanese border, as if they're about to go in in force. And he said, 'No, we don't intend to do that.' Again, that tracks what I'm--what I'm hearing today from State Department officials, who say that in part because of US messages to Israel--'Don't do this'--the Israelis have decided that a ground invasion would be unwise; instead, we'll have limited maneuvers back and forth, but not a major invasion.

SCHIEFFER: Now, the secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, heads to the region today. What exactly do you understand US policy to be at this point, David, and where do you think it goes from here?

Mr. IGNATIUS: I think you can sum up the dilemma for the United States, the goal for the United States in the question, "How will this war end?" Will it end with a strong Lebanese state, strong enough to control Hezbollah finally, strong enough to assert sovereignty throughout Lebanon, strong enough to keep the Syrian troops, who only left in April of last year, out of the country. And how do you achieve that? Or will it end in a failed state? A state that's been so weakened by this Israeli bombardment that it will be unable to put the pieces back together, that Hezbollah will regroup and be as strong as it was in the past? And that's the dilemma.

And I think the strategy for the US is to try to put together, with our allies--Arab and around the world--an international force that would go into southern Lebanon, as Israeli combat operations cease, accompany the Lebanese Army into the south, and provide finally a strong buffer. That's a very, very difficult proposition, but that's what we're trying to do.

SCHIEFFER: You wouldn't imagine that US forces would be involved in any kind of an international force, would you?

Mr. IGNATIUS: No. There's been a decision that US forces should not be specifically involved. This force is likely to build on the existing UNIFIL force that the United Nations has in southern Lebanon, which is now commanded by France, a country that knows Lebanon extremely well and has a strong military. The US is talking to countries like Italy, Turkey, Canada, all of which have very strong militaries, to try to send troops in.

You know, we only have to remember 1983 and the Marine barracks being blown up in Beirut and a similar kind of international presence mission to know how dangerous this will be. So, you know, this is not to be taken lightly. This is not just a kind of United Nations, blue-helmet separated--this is--this

could involve real combat.

SCHIEFFER: Well, obviously, the peace process is not helped as long as Hezbollah remains armed as it is, and one can certainly understand the Israeli argument, that they have to strike back when they're struck by these people. But with the targeting as it is and with so many civilians getting killed, it seems to me that the fine line here that the United States has to walk is somehow keep this Lebanese government from collapsing because of that, at the same time trying to reduce the power of Hezbollah. That's a tall order.

Mr. IGNATIUS: I think you state the problem succinctly. How can we remain friends with both Israel--our close, strategic ally in the Middle East--and with Lebanon--the Lebanese government that we helped put in place? There's a worry that as this war continues, the destruction in Lebanon increases, as the deaths of civilians increase, the ability of the Lebanese government to function, to put things back together, may be demolished in the process. So the US is really worried about how to help the government of Fouad Siniora, the Lebanese prime minister, survive and come out of this strong enough to do what everybody wants.

SCHIEFFER: Well, what about these two reports? Lebanon is saying that if Israel does come across the border in force on the ground that they'll send Lebanese troops to oppose them. Obviously, that's something that we don't want to see happen. And you now have Syria this morning saying, well, if those troops should somehow threaten Syria, they're prepared to enter the war. Do you think either of those things are going to happen?

Mr. IGNATIUS: I don't think they're significant military threats to Israel, but I think they are politically important. There is a danger now that the Lebanese Army will just splinter. That it will be unable to perform the function that we would like it to in the south as this kind of buffer because it's been riven by sectarian disputes. Most of the soldiers, the conscripts, in that army are Shiites, and so they're watching this with some difficulty.

Syria really isn't in a position today to launch a war against Israel. Everybody knows that. But I do think that in what Ambassador Ayalon said here on your program and in what I'm hearing from US officials, there is a recognition that it would be unwise for Israel to launch a major invasion.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Thank you very much, David.

And I'll be back with a final word in just a minute.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: Finally, today, with iPods and blogs and the Internet, there is a lot of serious talk these days--even among journalists--about whether newspapers are going to survive. But the awful news of last week reminded me just how much we need newspapers, and not always for the obvious reasons. Jill Abramson, who is the managing editor of The New York Times, says, `We use the Internet to search for specific information. But the joy of reading a

newspaper,' she says, 'comes from finding information we were not looking for.' Last week reminded me of just that.

The main news was so grim I found myself turning to the newspapers for a little relief. Deep in the Times one day last week, surrounded by all of that war news, I found an obituary of Robert Brooks, who founded Hooters restaurant chain. The writer said that Hooters was known for spicy chicken wings and even spicier waitresses. Now who could read that and not at least smile?

I found another story about the death of Arthur Haggerty. I learned he was credited with making dog training into a respectable profession and was known to legions of dogs as He Who Must Be Obeyed. Hadn't known of him myself, but I won't forget him now, after reading that.

And then there was a story I found on the business page that began, "Robie Livingstone has all but given up on having a positive underwear-buying experience." Now, how can you not read on when a story starts that way?

Maybe it's just me, but I was in a better humor after reading those stories. Of course, it didn't last long as the day wore on and the rest of the news rolled in.

That's it for us. We'll see you next week right here on FACE THE NATION.