

CNN LATE EDITION WITH WOLF BLITZER

Interview with Stephen Hadley; Interview With Buthaina Shaaban

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WOLF BLITZER, CNN ANCHOR: It's noon in Washington, 9 a.m. in Los Angeles, 6 p.m. in Rome, 7 p.m. in Beirut. Wherever you're watching from around the world, thanks very much for joining us for "LATE EDITION."

We'll get to my interview with U.S. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley in just a few minutes. First, though, let's get a quick check of what's in the news right now.

(....)

BLITZER: This is "LATE EDITION," the last word in Sunday talk.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

CONDOLEEZZA RICE, SECRETARY OF STATE: The Lebanese need to be given the same opportunity to chart their political future. And it's very much time that Syria get that message.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: Another week of heated demonstrations and strong demands for Syria to withdraw from Lebanon. Who will prevail? We'll get insight from Syrian Cabinet Minister Bouthaina Shaaban and **Adib Farha**, a former adviser to slain Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GEORGE W. BUSH, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: All free nations must stand with the forces of democracy and justice that have begun to transform the Middle East.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: The push for political change. Does the world embrace U.S. policy? Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., Richard Holbrooke, weigh in on the war on terror, Iran and democracy in the Middle East.

Welcome back. We'll talk with the top Syrian government official in just a moment. First,

though, let's get a quick check of what's making news right now.

(NEWSBREAK)

BLITZER: A serious plan for a full-troop withdrawal from Lebanon is now on the table. The two-stage exit would get under way by the end of the month and begin a process of ending a 29-year Syrian military presence in Lebanon. Our Beirut bureau chief, Brent Sadler, has been following this story. He is joining us now live with the latest.

Brent?

BRENT SADLER, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Thanks, Wolf.

The Syrian troop movements in Lebanon certainly are gearing up in terms of their momentum. A first phase appears to be now well under way. Western diplomatic sources confirming to CNN here that at least a third of Syria's 15,000 troops that were here just a few weeks ago have already crossed the border from Lebanon and have entered Syria to scenes of jubilation among Syrians at the border welcoming their troops back home.

The question is: What happens next? Well, all eyes have been on United Nations special envoy Terje Roed-Larsen, who told CNN in an exclusive interview with me only yesterday that he had been given very firm commitments by Syria's president, Bashar Al-Assad, that Syria was now, quote, "irreversibly committed to a complete and full withdrawal of Syrian troops and, most importantly, Syria's intelligence services in Lebanon in quick form."

That means that there is an expectation that in the coming weeks, Syria, along with its Lebanese supporters in the government here, will create a situation whereby there's full agreement for a total withdrawal of all those forces ahead of planned parliamentary elections here in mid-May.

Now that, Wolf, is a key demand of the U.S. president, George W. Bush. That environment for elections should take place without any coercion from Syria's military and especially its intelligence forces.

Now earlier this day, in the southern Lebanese town of Nabatiyeh, again another very large pro-Syrian demonstration called by two key Shia Muslim political parties here, mainly Hezbollah, the organization. Islamic Resistance as it's called here in Lebanon, denounced as a terrorist organization by the Washington administration, called out at least 100,000 supporters on the streets of Nabatiyeh demanding that there be rejection of international interference, mainly they say by the U.S. and France in internal Lebanese and Syrian affairs. This ahead of a counter-rally that's planned on the streets of Beirut Monday by the opposition to Syria here exactly one week to the day after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Wolf?

BLITZER: All right. Brent Sadler. I think you meant one month to the day, is that right?

SADLER: Sorry, yes, Wolf, yeah, one month to the day -- exactly four weeks ago Monday, that Mr. Hariri was killed in that massive blast.

BLITZER: And it's caused quite a tumult, quite a dramatic series of developments inside Lebanon. Brent Sadler reporting for us from Beirut.

Thank you, Brent, very much.

And just a short while ago, I spoke with Syrian cabinet minister Buthaina Shaaban about her country's next steps.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

BLITZER: Buthaina Shaaban, once again, thanks very much for joining us on "LATE EDITION." Let's get to the issue of the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. What is the timetable now that Syria has agreed to withdraw military and intelligence personnel from Lebanon? BUTHAINA SHAABAN, SYRIAN CABINET MINISTER: As you know, Wolf, Terje Larsen was here yesterday, and he met with President Assad. And there is two stages of withdrawal. The first stage will be completed by the end of March. And then the people from the two armies will meet and set the time for the second stage, which I think will be as soon as is logistically possible for the army to move.

The important thing, Wolf, is that the Syrian leadership has taken the decision to withdraw Syrian troops according to the Taif agreement and it will be done as soon as possible.

BLITZER: I spoke just a little while ago with President Bush's national security adviser, Steve Hadley, who says, like the president, that Syrian forces must be out of Lebanon by May when the Lebanese are scheduled to have their elections if there are to be free and fair elections in Lebanon. Can you meet that may timetable?

SHAABAN: You know, Wolf, today, Terje Larsen is saying in Beirut we have to take care that the troops should not withdraw too quickly. But I think the troops will meet a very fast timetable. But if you allow me to comment on that, you know, the elections will take place and I think that troops will move out of Lebanon probably before then. I don't know how logistically possible it's going to be, but probably before then.

BLITZER: And what about the intelligence operatives? There have been various estimates how many intelligence officers there may be in Lebanon, 5,000, maybe even more. What about them?

SHAABAN: Well, the intelligence services are part of our troops. And when the troops withdraw, this is intelligence related to the troops, they will be withdrawing with them.

BLITZER: Do you sense right now that there is in Lebanon a possibility that following a Syrian withdrawal that country could slide back into the civil war that occurred, as we all remember, in the '70s and '80s?

SHAABAN: Well, we certainly hope not. Everybody in the region is very worried about what might happen to Lebanon. And you remember when the civil war broke out, it was only Syria and Syrian troops and the Syrian people who stood by Lebanon. And we just hope that Lebanon will stand on its feet and will do what is right for the country and for the people.

But I really believe that for comments coming from Washington or from the U.N., we would love them to think of the country, of the region, of the stability of the region, you know, and of the future of the region, rather than giving some statements which might bring harm to all of us.

BLITZER: Does Syria support U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559 which calls for withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon?

SHAABAN: Well, President Assad said yesterday that he will implement what is related to Syria of that resolution, which is the withdrawal of the Syrian troops.

But honestly, Wolf, to be honest with you, nobody in the region believes that it is the Syrian troops that is the issue.

Syrian troops went to Lebanon to put an end to a civil war, to help Lebanon to reclaim its democracy and its life. But I think there is a much bigger and much more dangerous agenda for the region.

And that's why we urge the American administration to think of the region a little bit more carefully and to consult with the people of the region regarding the policies toward the people of the region.

BLITZER: Does Syria support the provision in Resolution 1559, which calls for the dismantling and the disarming of all the Lebanese militias, the Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias in Lebanon, specifically Hezbollah?

SHAABAN: Well, Hezbollah is not a Lebanese militia. Hezbollah is a political party that has 13 members in parliament. It is a very popular and it is a very important political party that put an end to Israeli occupation of Lebanon. And so it doesn't come under militia at all.

As I said to you, Wolf, there is a lot of work that needs to be done from other perspectives.

You know, the problem is that the American administration mostly listens to Israeli

sources who occupy our land and who have a different agenda in the region. But they have to listen to other sources. Syria has been saying for years that the only solution in the region is a just and comprehensive peace. And we said today, the only solution for the region is a just and comprehensive peace, and all these partial solutions will not work for anybody in the region.

BLITZER: Stephen Hadley, who was just on "LATE EDITION" with me -- he's President Bush's national security adviser -- he says Hezbollah is a terrorist organization which has an armed militia which must be disbanded, according to U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559. Hezbollah does have a military wing, as you know.

SHAABAN: I know. But it is a resistance against occupation. And there is still part of the Lebanese territory that is occupied. And you know, Wolf, when we hear all this we here in the Middle East, we think why is no such effort being made to implement other resolutions?

You know, 242, 338; our territories are still occupied; 194, the resolution concerning Palestinian people, Syrian people, Lebanese people -- we expect from the American administration, from the U.S. as a super power in the world, to be concerned about all people in the region, about the security of all people, Palestinian, Syrian, Lebanese, not just about the security of the Israelis because this will not bring security to anyone in the region.

BLITZER: One final question, Bouthaina Shaaban. A lot of U.S. officials wonder whether Syria is really committed to an independent Lebanon. They fear that Syria has always seen Lebanon as part of a greater Syria, and that explains why Syria doesn't have a formal embassy in Beirut because it doesn't recognize Lebanese independence.

What is the policy of the Syrian government when it comes to an independent and free Lebanon?

SHAABAN: It was in the 1950s, Wolf, that we had the same monetary system with Lebanon, and it was Syria who insisted in having a different monetary system.

It was the late President Assad who insisted on putting lines and borders between Syria and Lebanon. The Lebanese people are our brothers and sisters, and we are certainly interested in anything that is good for them.

The security of Lebanon is our security. The strength of Lebanon is our strength. So nobody should ever imagine we wish anything except good for Lebanon because good Lebanon means good Syria.

BLITZER: So you recognize that there should be a free and sovereign, independent Lebanon. Is that right?

SHAABAN: Absolutely. It is free and independent. I hope that the same recognition will

go to Palestine and to Iraq as well, to be free, sovereign and independent.

BLITZER: Bouthaina Shaaban, joining us from Damascus, once again thank you very much for spending a few moments on "LATE EDITION."

(END VIDEOTAPE)

BLITZER: And just ahead, we'll get the view from Lebanon. We'll talk with Middle East Analyst **Adib Farha**.

Then a diplomatic dialogue with two senior American statesmen, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former U.N. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke. They'll weigh in on the shifting dynamics in the Middle East, tensions between the U.S. and Iran and much more.

And, in case you missed it, we'll recap the highlights from the other Sunday morning talk shows.

Much more "LATE EDITION" right after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

BLITZER: (UNINTELLIGIBLE) and doing charity. And Hezbollah has a political arm as well.

(APPLAUSE)

It holds 12 seats in the Lebanese parliament.

Still, the Bush administration remains firm.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

RICE: Our view of Hezbollah has not changed. (END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: And joining us now with his perspective on how the Syria-Lebanon relationship is playing out, and what the potential changes mean for the Middle East region, is our guest. **Adib Farha** is a Middle East analyst. He's joining us here in our Washington studio.

Adib, thank you very much for joining us.

You heard Bouthaina Shaaban, the Syrian cabinet minister, say probably all the Syrian military and intelligence troops will be out by the time of the scheduled Lebanese elections in May. You believe her?

ADIB FARHA, MIDDLE EAST ANALYST: I'd like to believe her, but we've heard promises renege on more than once before, and already she's saying, probably, it's not a firm commitment.

Unfortunately, the Lebanese opposition feels that, even when Syria gives what sounds like a firm commitment, they still back down from it, much less when she's only saying "probably."

BLITZER: You were close to the slain Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, for many years. That assassination, that car bombing about a month or so ago has caused a tumultuous change of developments inside Lebanon right now.

Give us your assessment where the political winds are, what the political situation inside Lebanon is right now. How anxious are Lebanese to see the Syrians get out?

FARHA: I think there is no human being in the world that doesn't wish for his country to be free from any foreign presence, and to restore -- to be independent and fully sovereign over their land. And I think all of the Lebanese share that.

However, there are some Lebanese -- Hezbollah, obviously, being one of them -- who have their own interest in Syrian influence remaining in Lebanon because the interests of Syria and the interests of Hezbollah are intertwined.

But with the exception of Hezbollah, I would say the vast majority of the Lebanese are certainly hoping that the day will come when their country will be fully independent, fully sovereign and with absolutely no foreign troops.

BLITZER: They put together a very impressive demonstration on the streets of Beirut this past week. Hundreds of thousands of largely Lebanese -- yes, there were some Syrians, but mostly Lebanese who support Hezbollah, support the Syrians, were very vocal.

FARHA: Well, there is no denying the fact that Hezbollah is a force to be reckoned with on the Lebanese political scene. They enjoy a huge constituency.

However, I think, as much as Hezbollah made a statement of strength and force this week, which seems to have given them a stronger hand in the Lebanese political system, I think they also stand to lose from the demonstration of last Tuesday.

Until last Tuesday, Hezbollah had the unanimity and the solidarity of the vast majority of the Lebanese people, mostly because they stayed above the political fray. As of last Tuesday, they have declared themselves a party in the internal squabbles, and a lot of the opposition feel that Hezbollah is getting ready to do serious bidding when and if Syria finally pulls out.

BLITZER: Is it your understanding that U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, the

reference in there to disarming militias, Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias, is a direct reference to Hezbollah, that Hezbollah has a militia that must be disarmed?

FARHA: Well, according to the international community, Hezbollah must disarm. That's what 1559 says.

I mean, the reference was obviously -- when they say "foreign and local militias," there are no other ones.

The only problem here is that most of the Lebanese do not view Hezbollah as a militia. It is viewed as a resistance movement.

However, things have started to change since the Israeli evacuation of May 2000, and the more Hezbollah insists on liberating the Shebaa Farms, the more it loses some of the support of the Lebanese...

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: The Shebaa Farms is a tiny little area in the southern part of Lebanon, disputed area. It either belongs to Syria or Lebanon, depending on whom you speak to.

FARHA: Right. If you'll give me a minute here, Wolf, the Shebaa Farms is Lebanese. However, as far as the United Nations is concerned, which is the only international legitimacy, it is part of Syria. And in fact it had become part of Syria before it was occupied by Israel.

Therefore, in accordance with the United Nations, any resistance activities in the Shebaa Farms is outside Resolution 425. If Syria would like to help Hezbollah and the Lebanese to liberate Shebaa Farms, then Syria ought to send the proper documents to the United Nations indicating that it is Lebanese. Then the resistance activities will be legitimate and covered under the April 1996 understandings.

BLITZER: Bottom-line question, you heard Bouthaina Shaaban say that Syria does recognize a sovereign, free, independent Lebanon, doesn't regard it necessarily as part of greater Syria. Do you believe that?

FARHA: I don't think most Lebanese believe that.

BLITZER: What do most Lebanese, in your opinion, believe?

FARHA: Judging by Syrian actions, judging by Syrian maps that you see all over Syria, most Lebanese feel that the Syrians still maintain that Lebanon is part of the greater Syria and it is a part that has to return to Syria; not any different than Saddam Hussein used to consider Kuwait part of Iraq.

BLITZER: **Adib Farha**, we have to leave it right there. Thanks very much for joining us.

FARHA: Thank you.

BLITZER: Good luck to you and to all the Lebanese people.

FARHA: Thank you.