

Middle East Update

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MODERATOR: Good morning. Welcome to the Foreign Press Center. We're happy today to have with us David Welch, the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs in the Department of State, to do a Middle East update. We have with us, also, New York Foreign Press Center via DVC. I'll ask you all to turn your phones off and to identify yourselves when you ask your questions and what your affiliation is. Because I know there are a lot of people here today, we're going to just start right away.

David, please.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Thank you, Duncan. Hello, everybody. Nice to see you all. And I propose we should go right to questions and answers. I mean, I could make an opening statement, but there are a lot of you and I am sure that you have quite a number of questions, so I'd like to use this time to maximum advantage.

Joyce.

QUESTION: Yes, Joyce Karam with Al Hayat newspaper. What do you think should be done to make Syria stop rearming Hezbollah?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, thank you for asking this question. One of the most important aspects of the resolution passed by the Security Council a few days ago, Resolution Number 1701, is a call for all countries to observe an arms embargo on any weapons transfers into Lebanon except for things that are going to the Government of Lebanon and authorized security institutions. That requirement would apply to any country, including Syria and Iran. We think that one of the most important achievements in this resolution is this call for observation of an arms embargo and its administration not just by Lebanon, but also by the international community. So you can be sure that we'll be paying very close attention to any such transfers that are going into Lebanon, since it's now a matter of an international obligation that countries should avoid doing this.

If you step back from this resolution just a moment, though, let's look at the problem that we saw here. One aspect of it is you have a state within a state, a militia that has been armed, as we see, with potent weaponry. It had to have gotten that from someplace. We think that one of the vulnerabilities in this situation, which existed in the past, was the irresponsibility of some countries in allowing these weapons to come into Lebanon, to go to a terrorist organization like Hezbollah, which then used them against the interests of the people in the state of Lebanon. So closing off that possibility is a very important achievement. Now the hard work comes in implementing this aspect and the other aspects of the resolution.

MODERATOR: Nadia, Al-Arabija.

QUESTION: Thank you. Nadia Bilbassy Charters with Al-Arabija.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Hi.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you for addressing us. I just wanted to ask you, since the major military battles is over now, the ceasefire seems to be holding, if you look back and people talk about losers and winners, some want to criticize the U.S. diplomacy and say you are the biggest loser, because you stand isolated in the Arab and Muslim world. If you would look back in retrospect, would you think that you have failed in your effort to call for a ceasefire and you betrayed the Lebanese Government, the very government that you're trying to support in the beginning?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, come as no surprise that I don't agree with the premise. Look, we called for a cessation of hostilities to build for a ceasefire on a more permanent basis. What the United States didn't want to see was a simple and easy solution such as a declaration that we want a ceasefire right now. What we wanted to see was an effort to put in place rules, restrictions so that this situation does not happen again. This has been a very disturbed border for a long time. Unlike Israel's borders with others of its neighbors, you don't have a peace treaty between Lebanon and Israel, so the amount of confidence on each side is not very high. And regrettably, there have been actors who have chosen, for one reason or another, to try and disrupt this situation, take advantage of the climate and the context that existed in the region and use it to their political advantage.

So I think what we have achieved here in bringing a cessation of hostilities, which so far is holding, is architecture for enhanced competence and security for the future. Now I'm, of course, practical and our diplomacy has had this element of practicality from the very start. That is this is not going to be simple to do. It isn't good enough simply to have a situation where everybody comes back and they can do exactly the same thing as before.

So what has been achieved now? There will be the deployment of the Lebanese army into the south of Lebanon. You might say that's a natural thing for a country to do that is to deploy its army to its own borders. But if you know the history of Lebanon, this actually has not happened before. So that's first and most important.

Second, the international community has decided that it should supplement, enhance the international forces that are present there already to provide additional confidence and security along the border and in other areas potentially. That force is now being shaped by the United Nations to increase the UNIFIL that is already



there with increased equipment and capabilities so that it can discharge these new tasks. Third, the international community and Lebanon and Israel have agreed that there has to be a new security environment. What does that consist of? There can be no armed groups present in the area of operations of this force. There's going to be an arms embargo except, of course, for the legitimate use of the Lebanese Government.

Third, no foreign fighters should be present in this area. And fourth, there should be respect for the blue line between the parties. So if these elements are put in place with confidence, rigor and discipline by Lebanon, by Israel, by the international community and observed by outside nations, then I think we return to a situation not like the one before, but to one in which everybody else can have a lot more confidence and security.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, Umit Enginsoy with Turkish NTV. Mr. Secretary, Turkey said yesterday that it would wait for a second UN Security Council resolution before making an ultimate decision of whether or not to send troops to the Lebanon peacekeeping force. Now do you think a second resolution is necessary or do you think the Turks are dragging their feet or, in general, what's the U.S. position on the potential Turkish contribution to the force? Thanks.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: We consider that the first most important step to be taken now for implementation of this resolution is that the parties observe a cessation of hostilities. Second, the United Nations rapidly should form the new elements to be added to the existing UNIFIL forces so that those are prepared as quickly as possible to deploy into Lebanon to help UNIFIL do its job pursuant to this new resolution. Third, we believe that responsible countries, including Turkey, might want to consider participation. This is a decision for each country to make on the basis of its national interests and its own foreign policy guidelines. Our experience in working with Turkey on these issues has been a good one and we have great confidence in the ability of the Turkish military. That said, it's a subject for Turkey to decide as it looks at this situation.

The present resolution, sir, authorizes the composition of a new and enhanced UNIFIL. A second resolution is out there as a possibility should it be necessary to have an additional mandate for the United Nations activity. But presently there's sufficient legal authority under international law to do what is necessary to make the new force.

QUESTION: Yes. Hisham Melham, An Nahar newspaper in Beirut. Mr. Secretary, the President has said repeatedly that the United States should deal with the root causes of the problem, and by the root causes he was not talking about the Arab-Israeli conflict. He was talking essentially about Hezbollah, as a phenomena, of a state within a state. Now, do you think that root causes would have been solved if Hezbollah, let's say, withdrew north of the Litani and yet maintained its military structure, control and command and whatever in the rest of the country? Given the fact that the Lebanese Government is saying publicly that they are unwilling or unable to disarm Hezbollah and that they would have to do that through negotiation. Yesterday, Nasrallah said essentially he's not interested in this issue and that Hezbollah remains the "protector" of the homeland.

It seems to me that probably a year from now we will be talking about the need to disarm Hezbollah, one way or the other. And therefore it seems to me that Hezbollah could claim we withdrew north of the Litani to fight for another day and the root causes, the way the President of the United States has defined them, will not have been resolved.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Hisham, we believe that the best protection for Lebanon and its people is offered by a fully sovereign government that controls all that goes on within its own country. The existence of a state within a state, an armed political party that acts outside the rules of normal statecraft is unacceptable to the international community and I would argue to the Lebanese people.

Now, there are obligations in Resolution 1559 and even before that in the Taif agreement, for example, that bind Lebanon to try and control events within Lebanon. This resolution offers greater international support for that to be achieved. But at the end of the day, implied in your question is a recognition of the reality: It is Lebanon that is responsible for determining its own future in this regard. We stand ready to help. By passing this resolution 15 to 0, unanimously in the Security Council, the world's voice has been made crystal clear. That in returning to the status quo, one aspect of that, is to assist Lebanon in completing this process of disarmament. Begun back in Taif as part of ending the Lebanese civil war, but unfortunately not yet completed. That has to begin, of course, in the south where the so-called resistance has exposed the Lebanese people and the Lebanese state to very grievous damage from an action that they took out of their own self-interest, not in the interest of the Lebanese people.

Now we have a situation where the steps can be taken to begin to correct this; first and most importantly in the south, but proceeding outward from there.

QUESTION: David -- I'm sorry -- Mr. Secretary, Taif has been --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: That is my name (laughter), Hisham.

QUESTION: You agreed upon, more than 15 years ago, 1559 two years ago --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- and you know the Byzantine nature of Lebanese politics, the influence of the Syrians and the Iranians today, both the duo of Bashar al-Asad and Ahmadi-Nejad claiming victory over the rebels in Lebanon. And what I'm trying to say is that -- are you going to, let's say, link aid to Lebanon, to rebuilding Lebanon, the donors' conference, let's say, with practical measures on the ground that the Lebanese Government should deliver on the issue of Hezbollah, dealing with it squarely and not again postponing it indefinitely?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, let me say this about the speeches that have been made recently about this issue. I think it's a sad situation when leaders of other countries can stand on this rubble and proclaim their vision of the interests of Lebanon's people. You know, this is not the price the people of Lebanon should pay so that they can exercise their political punditry. I don't -- we don't believe in making assistance for humanitarian purposes or reconstruction conditional. But there is the reality that people cannot help unless there is confidence and will on the part of all Lebanese to correct the situation that has existed.

So to that degree, yes, the Government of Lebanon and the people of Lebanon have a common responsibility to provide an environment where international support can help. Otherwise, if there is an element of lawlessness, if people don't observe the cessation of hostilities on the Lebanese side, it won't be possible to lend that support. That's just a practical reality.

MODERATOR: Barry.

QUESTION: Barry Schweid, Associated Press. Could you give us an idea of the schedule, or if it's not all that formal, the planning for the U.S. assistance, the \$10 million, and could you give us some idea how many countries -- and if you can specify which, that would be even better -- are lined up now to be part of this peacekeeping force? When might it gel, when might it be deployed?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Okay. Those are two big questions, there, Barry, if I might just start with the humanitarian reconstruction assistance portion of that first. As you know, the United States has already been devoting humanitarian assistance resources to Lebanon. We did that from the outset of this crisis and we are continuing that effort today. We are planning to marshal significant new additional resources in support of Lebanon. I can't make any announcements now with respect to that because we haven't completed our own deliberative process, but the United States will, once again, assume a leadership role in providing help.

QUESTION: And military training? I meant specifically --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: I include that kind of support in my answer. Other countries have come forward and declared that -- their pledge to the same ends, as you saw, that there were some of those declarations at the Rome conference. Now the Government of Sweden, I think, is considering hosting a humanitarian relief conference at the end of the month. I would imagine you will see broad international support for that and broad attendance. We will, of course, go ourselves. Then following that, we're looking at ideas such as how to bring forward the conference on Lebanon that we had been hoping to hold even prior to this conference -- to this crisis. I don't know that there's a fixed date for that yet, but I don't think that it will be long before we look at that possibility as well. The purpose of that second event would be to support reconstruction assistance.

What was the second part of your question?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Ah, the force formation. Well, there are UNIFIL forces available right now, which could deploy in support of a Lebanese army. But the UN is on a fast track to try and supplement and enhance those forces and they are meeting every day in preparation for that. We'll be sending a team, a senior interagency team up there to the United Nations tomorrow and Thursday to work with the Department of Peacekeeping to help in shaping the new and enhanced UNIFIL.

QUESTION: Ron Baygents, Kuwait News Agency. Mr. Welch, what could you say to counter the apparently widespread perception even in the mainstream U.S. media -- I was listening to things even this morning that the Iranians are basically demonstrating their power and their muscularity, they are showing that they can, in fact, supply Hezbollah, which can kill Israelis, with virtual impunity, meaning they have not been disarmed and some believe are, in fact, rearming even now. And then the idea that they are active in Iraq with the Shia militias and also are expected to formally reject the UN nuclear resolution by the end of the month. How do you counter this image that they are quite confident in standing up to the United States? Thank you.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, I think the only antidote to that kind of disturbance, interference and obstructionism is to see an expansion of opportunity and hope and support for fledgling democracies like that of Lebanon. Look, the Lebanese people don't need all this advice and interference from outside, such as that coming from Iran. That message, by the way, what's it got at its core? It's got an element that -- a disturbing tendency to violence. It's got a disturbing usurpation of the rights of the people concerned. I mean, did anyone ever ask the citizens of Lebanon would they or would they not prefer to see this conflict launched by a state within a state? No one ever asked their permission. And now others are seeking to take advantage of that and glorify this on the ruins and destruction that has occurred with such tremendous loss of life on all sides. That is not a message that is going to succeed in the long term. So I think that's one reason why we see these leaders out there giving their speeches now while, you know, the smoke is still clearing so that they can take advantage of what they perceive to -- as some element of support, while that smoke is still there because it won't last.

QUESTION: Christoph von Marschall from the German Daily Der Tagesspiegel. I would ask you to help me to get the facts right before we talk about interpretation because there's always two different things. If got that right that right that in this UN resolution there is no explicit clause allowed (ph) on disarmament of Hezbollah and how it will be enforced, there is no Chapter 7 enforcement for the mandate for the international troops and there is no control of the border between Syria and Lebanon? And if this is true, I understand why Hezbollah shouldn't claim victory. Can the United States claim a diplomatic victory if it's (inaudible) right? And please correct me if I'm wrong.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Okay. So let me just make sure I have them in order: disarmament, Chapter 7 --

QUESTION: Enforcement and the Syria-Lebanon border -- international control on that.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, one good place in checking the facts would be to read the resolution. On disarmament, it says several things. It talks about supporting the completion of the disarmament process in Lebanon a number of ways. First, it says there can be no armed groups in the area of operations of the new force. I mean, to me that is disarmament. Second, it talks about the Secretary General presenting proposals in implementation of 1559 on how to assist the Government of Lebanon in the process of disarming the militias that are there. Third, it puts new controls into effect to prevent rearmament, like an arms embargo.

Chapter 7 you ask about -- this is not a Chapter 7 resolution. This is a resolution adopted under Chapter 6, but it contains all the elements of a Chapter 7-like resolution -- considers the situation a threat to international peace and security. It talks about authorizing -- deciding to authorize a new and enhanced force which has the ability use all the means necessary to achieve its objectives. Third, there are controls on the borders. This is, of course, the responsibility of the Government of Lebanon in the first instance, but it offers the assistance of the international community to broaden their ability to achieve the control of their frontier and of their seaports and their airport. So I would argue that all three of those elements are, you know, well addressed in the resolution.

Look, the resolution is a decision of the international community. To translate that into facts on the ground, a lot of work has to happen. That work is underway now. I think with goodwill, with good political support and the kind we saw in the 15-0 vote, this can be done. But it's still to be done, not done yet.

QUESTION: Mohamed El-Settoui, Nile Egyptian Television. Are you, in a way, disappointed with the results of the world or in other words the apparent failure of the Israeli army to destroy the military capabilities of Hezbollah? And the other thing, are you willing now to engage Syria with regard to the situation in Lebanon because the Administration has been criticized repeatedly for the failure to engage Iran and Syria?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Look, it's not a fair question to ask anyone are you disappointed in the results of the war? That's like asking, you know, have you stopped beating your wife. We don't like wars. No one likes a war. This one was not launched by us, by Israel. It was launched by one party. For whatever their reasons, they decided to undertake this action with, I believe, grievous consequences to themselves and certainly, a lot of damage to Lebanon, the Lebanese people, citizens of Northern Israel and at great cost to the international community.

We are determined to try and turn what has been a tragedy into change. Change is built on the fundamentals of restoring stability and security in this area, as I described them. So it's not a question of, are we disappointed in the results. We are determined to make a difference here.

What was the second part of your question?

QUESTION: Are you going to engage Syria and (inaudible)?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: We work with the Government of Lebanon. We consider that the Government of Lebanon can and should step up to its responsibilities as a government. Frankly, we didn't see much value in engaging the Syrians until they can prove that they're a positive and constructive force in Lebanon and there's a long way to go in that respect.

MODERATOR: Al Jazeera.

QUESTION: Mohammad Alami, Al Jazeera. Sir, Secretary Rice talked earlier before the war or during the first few days about, this is the new Middle East. Can you tell us, sir, what's new today in the Middle East?

Two, I am sure you're aware of the tremendous anger at United States in the Arab and Muslim worlds because of the perception Washington provided weapons, diplomatic cover to Israel. What are you going to do about that specifically?

And three, can I just have your take on who won, who lost in this war? In the Israeli media, they're talking about the -- Israel's failure to achieve its goals, but the President is talking about the defeat of Hezbollah.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: We have always considered that to bring change in the Middle East is not going to be an easy or quick process. You know, unfortunately, the Middle East sometimes gets obscured by a conflict here or there. These are -- what happens in this case is, I believe, very, very important and I don't mean to make light of that. But let's remember that most of the Middle East is peaceful. And I think sometimes, we generalize too easily about the whole region because of a certain set of conflicts.

I think solutions are built by tackling each problem on its merits and dealing with it. There are enemies to this process of bringing hope, opportunity and greater freedom throughout the region. Unfortunately, sometimes, those people use violence, even terror, to pursue their means. I think in the long run, theirs is a negative message because most people don't want to have that kind of future. Does new policies of countries, including perhaps even my own, engender a popular reaction? Yes, they do. And we are conscious of that. Look, we would -- we do not believe that people should make decisions in the heat of the moment based on passions that sometimes, if left unbridled, will lead to worse outcomes.

The United States has been a leader for peace in this region for several decades. We have a lot of achievements to our record. The fact that Lebanon today has an elected democratic parliament, that it is free of Syrian forces, that it has a government that enjoys the respect of the international community, even as people attack it from within and from outside, is partly due to American effort and leadership.

Would we have preferred to not see this crisis? Absolutely right, sir. You know, we take no joy in seeing the loss of life and the destruction of property that has occurred on both sides of that border. And no one is a winner from that. But let's go back and take a look at what motivates our interest here. We are interested in the future of Lebanon. There is no country that is more supportive of the interests of the Lebanese people than the United States. And I believe that Lebanon can and will emerge stronger from these events. As it does so, the United States will be working side by side with it to achieve those goals.

MODERATOR: Shmuel Rosner.

QUESTION: Hello, Shmuel Rosner with Haaretz Daily. Mr. Secretary, it was published that in your discussions in Jerusalem, you suggested to the Israeli Government to withdraw from the Shebaa Farms. Can you elaborate on that and talk a little bit about the future of this disputed area?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, a lot was published about what we did and did not do.

QUESTION: How much of it was true?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Some of it was true and some of it was not true. And there are facts and there are non-facts and with all due respect to the journalistic community, I would recommend that you not believe everything you read in the press, including your own press.

MODERATOR: Khaled.

QUESTION: Hello, Mr. Welch. Khaled Dawoud, Al-Ahram newspaper and Egypt Television. I have two questions, please sir. Just to follow up on the issue of, you know, deploying the -- or monitoring the border between Lebanon and as the President said yesterday, and also monitoring the ports, where in the resolution does it say that the enhanced UN force, or UNIFIL force, will take this responsibility? I mean, maybe this will cause problems with Syria.

And my second question that the President himself and you apparently continue on blaming Hezbollah for starting this conflict, and my question is so do you think that the Israeli reaction is justified with all -- I mean, many other countries, including the United Nations Secretary General, some UN organizations, human rights groups said this is a violation of humanitarian law. And the President yesterday said that he's sorry that some people died in this conflict -- over one thousand people. Does this yet quantify the sum?

Thank you very much, sir.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: The resolution mentions in a number of places ways in which the UNIFIL, when it's been enhanced and has changed, can support Lebanon in protecting Lebanon. But I think, Khaled, the most important protection for Lebanon would be if Syria and Iran themselves observed the terms of the resolution. This resolution calls for countries not to introduce weapons into Lebanon and, therefore, quite apart from what the Government of Lebanon does or UNIFIL does, they have a responsibility under this decision.

I have said before to you and to others that there is no acceptable loss of innocent life. I don't think we're here in the business of quantifying what are acceptable numbers of civilian casualties, whether those are Israelis, whether they are Lebanese or others. It's regrettable and we are deeply sorry that there has been loss of life in this situation on all sides. And that just strengthens our determination, first, to bring it to an end and to bring it to an end in such a manner that it doesn't happen again.

QUESTION: You know, when you talked about --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, what would you like, to sit up here with a balance? I mean, look, I'm not going to get into that game, Khaled. I mean, I don't think it would be satisfying to any of the families concerned to hear that their loved ones are weighed in that regard.

QUESTION: Omar Abdel-Razek, BBC Arabic. Mr. Secretary, I would like to ask you first about the political discourse of this Administration. When the President yesterday declared Lebanon as a third front in the war of terror the United States is engaged in now and when you consider this kind of war, the late war between Israel and Hezbollah as a war between the forces defending freedom versus forces defending terror, do you consider this area a reliable evaluation for the situation in the Middle East? Everybody knows that Hezbollah and Hamas are not al-Qaida. And also, does it mean that anybody will disagree, even the populars in the street -- the population of the Middle East will disagree with the American Administration, will be classified automatically as defending terror? Thank you.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, I don't believe that if we say that conducting violence against innocent civilians is terrorism, that that means that we are against entire categories of people just because they may have views about the conflicts that lay behind this violence.

Look, we view Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations. That was true before this conflict and it is true today. If they were to change their policies, we might have a different view about them. But they do conduct terrorist operations and they are responsible for the consequences. I think that this view is widely shared within the international community. And you know, setting aside the popular passions that you describe, I think one reason that you have a decision on the part of the Security Council like the one we saw just a few days ago, 15-0, I will remind you, all members of the Security Council voting the same way, is that most people agree that this kind of thing should not happen. There is no cause that justifies it.

MODERATOR: Hanan.

QUESTION: Hanan El-Badry, Rose El-Youseff, (inaudible) daily newspaper. Are you calling for a peace conference like Madrid '91? And I would like to know, did you originally contact some Arab countries regarding that matter like Egypt and Saudi Arabia? And are you planning to go to the -- to go back to the region very soon? This is my first question.

The second one, regarding the public diplomacy, I was talking with one of our editors today and he told me, is it the time for the Americans to kiss the public diplomacy goodbye?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, I think what I'm doing here today is public diplomacy, so I guess you have the answer to your second question.

We believe that what is -- this crisis has distracted us from effort that we should be undertaking to address the key conflicts in the area. This is, again, one of our concerns particularly with respect to Lebanon. One of the ways that we tried to help Lebanon was by the process laid out in Resolution 1559 which would correct the situation inside the country. That's why we supported the national dialogue that the Government of Lebanon launched a few months ago to try and address some of these remaining problems. We see an opportunity now for that process to continue and to be completed. The international community can help, I think. We look forward to the proposals the Secretary General may make in the coming days on how to address, for example, the disarmament provisions of Taif and 1559, and we shall see what support we and the international community can provide to that process.

In terms of addressing the broader issue of peace between Arabs and Israelis, and in particular, the Palestinian question, I -- we are not going to slack off in our efforts there. We believe that we should redouble our attention to this. This is a time for renewed interest in the situation between Israelis and Palestinians. We would prefer that there be a government on the Palestinian Authority side that subscribes to the principles of the peace process. When and if they do, then we're prepared to work with them and I'm sure the Government of Israel would be too.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MODERATOR: We have very little time, so --

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MODERATOR: I don't want to do follow-ups if I can help it. Sorry. We just have too many people who haven't (inaudible). This lady back here has been waiting a long time.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MODERATOR: There are a lot of people here today. We have a lot of different --

QUESTION: Hello. My name is Olivia Schoeller from the German newspaper Berliner Zeitung. And I was just wondering, what does the U.S. Government think why Hezbollah kidnapped these two soldiers? What is your interpretation of the reason why this happened?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: I'm not sure. We haven't asked them and they haven't told us.

QUESTION: What do you think -- I mean, you've -- you must talk about their --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, all that I could offer would be speculation, perhaps you would consider it informed, perhaps you might not. What I do know is that they made a big mistake and they paid dearly for it.

MODERATOR: Mounzer's been waiting patiently in the front here.

QUESTION: I appreciate it. The standing -- Mounzer Sleiman with Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi. The standing of United States in the region in the Arab world and Islamic world is better after this crisis than before or not? And the other question, because this question you have not answered directly, if I may say, yet, the other thing is how many shipment of cluster bombs has been approved by this Administration to the Israelis and how many in the pipe?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: I didn't get that question, so you're right, I didn't answer it.

Is our standing better or worse?

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Listen, I'm not running a popularity contest here. Our job is to try and improve the situation. We didn't start this crisis and we tried to bring it to an end in such a way that protects the security of all concerned. The decision that came out of the Security Council would not have happened without the leadership of the United States. It is a substantial decision. It provides an opportunity for Lebanese to help protect their future. We intend to be right there to help them do that.

In the end, results speak for themselves and we'll have to see whether the blurred and negative vision of those who want to intervene with violence is the kind of message that will succeed in the Middle East. As some have said, if that's the new Middle East that they are preaching, then we want no part of it; quite the contrary. The United States is going to lead against that tendency. And I'm convinced because I know this area well; I've lived there for quite a number of years. I know many people from across the region. I believe that the great overwhelming majority of folks do not want that negative message. They don't believe in a future of violence and hatred. They seek one of peace and freedom. In that, they'll have no stronger partner than us.

MODERATOR: Last question. No follow-ups. We have too many --last question.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.) Lambros --

MODERATOR: It's true, sorry. It wasn't a follow up. It wasn't a follow up. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Lambros Papantoniou, Greek correspondent, Eleftheros Typos, Greek Daily. Mr. Secretary, why you didn't want to send U.S. troops in that country (inaudible) in the framework of the international force to be deployed for peace? "The U.S. reject many, many times." Why?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, let me be clear, we participate in peacekeeping operations in quite a number of places. But traditionally, the United States has not participated in UN peacekeeping operations. We do so at a fairly modest level, generally speaking. We prefer to command our own forces when they're in these situations, so the type of mandate makes a difference to us.

Second, we want to see a peacekeeping operation in Lebanon that can do a good job with protecting the security and stability of the area. And our own history in Lebanon has not been altogether a happy one, so one would have to weigh these decisions very carefully in the case of the United States. We believe that other countries can play a very good role in this area and we encourage their participation.

QUESTION: Yet why has the U.S. insisted that European forces must be deployed, including Greece and Turkey? In the meantime, why not forces from Latin America, Japan, China, et cetera?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Sir, we have no objection to any of those that you list. Our only criteria is who can help and do an effective job. And I think European forces are quite credible in that regard, including some of the ones you mentioned.

MODERATOR: One -- the very last question here from Lebanon.

QUESTION: The question has not been answered here.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: It won't be the only question I don't answer today. (Laughter.) Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Okay. Mayssa Zeidan from Al-Mustaqbal newspaper and Futures (ph) in Lebanon. I just want to ask you -- you said President Bush (inaudible) first this crisis began, said that Syria and Iran should (ph) (inaudible) accounted. This crisis end, the Lebanese people saw their Prime Minister crying over a destroying country while they saw the Iranian leader and the Syrian leader victorious and, you know, they -- dancing in their cities by this victory. Maybe the Lebanese people deserve to know what does it mean when the superpowers in the world say Syria and Iran should held accountable for what happened. Can you please?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Well, first of all, I think the Lebanese people deserve some credit for their strength throughout this situation and the Government of Lebanon also deserves some credit. And Prime Minister Siniora is an effective advocate for the interests of all Lebanese and he deserves our support and our respect for that. I find it terrible that the President of Iran who seeks to have his nation respected in the international community should take advantage of this tragedy in the manner that he is doing. As for the President of Syria, you can make your own judgment about the quality of his discourse throughout this crisis and his recent speech. It's, once again, a signal of how little they add to the solution of these conflicts. Instead they're trying to pile on popular emotion and anger at a time of tragedy for their own selfish advantage. What good that will do, I think history will judge.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH: Thank you.



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