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## Interview by Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed of Asharq Al-Awsat

### Secretary Colin L. Powell

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**SECRETARY POWELL:** -- from Panama to Nicaragua, from Nicaragua to Honduras, and that's our air base in Honduras, Soto Cono.

So in a helicopter it's Tegucigalpa, then back out to the -- Tegucigalpa to Soto Cono, then Soto Cono to College Station last night, then I had to change all of my software and take out all of the Central American software and put in the Chinese software to give a speech this morning in Texas.

**QUESTION:** So do you use sleeping tablets to organize yourself?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Yes. Well, I wouldn't call them that. They're a wonderful medication -- not medication. How would you call it? They're called ambien, which is very good. You don't use ambien? Everybody here uses ambien.

**QUESTION:** I use it when I go on trip and long distance travel.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Yeah. I didn't need it this time because I was in the same time zone.

**QUESTION:** I see.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** It's when I go to your part of the world. I need to get my rest.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, you know, I like to start with the -- with the latest, with the Syrian comment about Iraq. One official was quoted. Actually, in our newspaper today was said, "It is the occupation what brought the scale of terrorism that high in the region." Of course, obviously, they heard it probably to in Saudi Arabia and few places.

And second, said he -- or she thinks Syria -- the U.S. has to leave Iraq.

Is this -- do you think this is -- is part of this war of words between Syria and the U.S., how do you characterize it?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Well, let's go to the substance of what the individual said. The cause of the problems are remnants of the old regime and some number of outsiders who have come in. The cause of the problems are people who want to go back to the days of a dictator like Saddam Hussein, filling mass graves is the cause of the problem.

We want to end our presence in Iraq as quickly as possible. We don't want to be occupiers. It's not America's style. So we are going to stay there long enough to bring the security situation under control until the Iraqi people put in a form of government that will be a form of government selected by the Iraqi people and not determined by these ex-Baathists and other criminals who are trying to kill not just Americans, but they're killing far more Iraqis than they are Americans. And these are people who are attacking the international community; they're attacking the United Nations; they're attacking

the people who have come to support us. We'll stay the course. We will go after these destroyers of freedom and (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** What is your timetable for all these things you just mentioned?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Well, as you know, we have succeeded in getting the UN to pass a resolution allowing the Governing Council to provide its plan and a time schedule by the 8th of December. So we look forward to that from the Governing Council and not just an American diktat or a French diktat or a German diktat. The Governing Council is working on their plan now, you know, they're trying to work things (inaudible) and both Ambassador Bremer and I have talked about this, that it should be possible with a lot of hard work to have a constitution done in six months. It's not a deadline, but it seems to be a reasonable estimation for the Iraqis to determine how long it actually takes.

And then once you have a constitution, then you can get it ratified by referendum and then you can start planning your elections. I would like to see it come to an end by the end of next year, but (inaudible). So it's not as important as the date as the reality of a democratic government and a president (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** So before the end of next year?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** We would all like to see it earlier. But I mean, I'm looking at a reasonable timeframe for the plan that Ambassador Bremer is following.

Now, in that period of time between now and whenever they do finish the work and have the election, we will be passing more and more responsibility and authority to the Iraqi ministries.

All sorts of things are happening now. People are organizing ministries and their other governmental agencies are starting to function. Ambassador Bremer plans to pass the authority gradually and consistent with their ability to handle authority with the \$20 billion that the United States Congress just approved.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but I mean, the reality on the ground is quite different right now with the violence and the attacks is -- is larger than before, than before the past six months. Don't you anticipate this is going to be probably more of a nightmare in the coming six months or 12 months?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** I don't know that I would characterize it as a nightmare (inaudible) Sunni Triangle. It's a serious problem and it manifests itself by attacks on our troops and attacks on the Iraqi infrastructure. They're going after the Iraqi police. We're trying to keep peace (inaudible) and we'll have to deal with it. And I'm confident in our commanders and our intelligence people. This is a problem now, and I'm not denying a problem, I am not denying that it is a serious problem. But if you go up north, you don't see this kind of activity. If you go down south, you don't see this kind of activity. There are occasional problems. But for the most part it's confined to the triangle around Baghdad, which --

**QUESTION:** Do you think the Sunnis is just feeling they are not represented in the whole, or that's part of the concept?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** I think that's part of it. They were the privileged. They were the ones who had the power. They were the ones who were favored by Saddam Hussein.

**QUESTION:** And you're punishing them for that.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** How are we punishing them?

**QUESTION:** Not having, you know, a representative at the Council.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** No, we're not trying to punish anyone. One of the problems of the Sunni community is the absence of the old Baath Party. They don't have any political organizations to represent them. They don't have political leaders to represent them who are not contaminated by their relationships. Institutions will have to be developed. The Sunnis would be best served by participating in, you know, the process that helps to write the constitution they will be recommending, not by terrorism, but for helping to create a constitution that will respect every segment of society.

**QUESTION:** Have you ever entertained the idea or you discuss it in the government here, the possibility of American withdrawal if things get, get worst came to the point that you had to leave?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** No.

**QUESTION:** Never? And do you see any scenario that could happen, will happen, you know, that will push you out?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** We're going to stay and we're going to finish this. We're not being attacked by an army. We're being attacked by insurgents. They don't represent all of the people of Iraq. Most of the people of Iraq are glad Saddam is gone. There's nobody chanting, to bring him back except for these remnants. We've released the curfew during Ramadan. People are out, they want to shop, they want to go to stores, they want their children to go to school. Why couldn't their children go to school last week? Was it because of the occupation or was it because of these people who are threatening to conduct attacks?

So the problem is those who are resisting the change that is taking place (inaudible), ending our presence there as quickly as we can, but we are not going to turn and run because it gets difficult for a period of time before (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** I saw your statement about Saddam was -- is not -- you don't believe Saddam is behind it.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** I don't know if he is. People were saying yes last week, that we know Saddam is behind it. I don't know any such thing. I don't know who is behind it.

**QUESTION:** Bin Laden?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** In Iraq?

**QUESTION:** Yeah. You don't think they have -- the suicide bombs are al-Qaida?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** No, I have no reason to believe that. I'm very careful about what I say. I have no reason to believe that they are behind it, but I can't say they are not behind it. So I tend not to make claims just for the sake of making a headline. I don't know whether Saddam is alive or if he's dead. If he's dead, I don't know where his body is. If he is alive, I don't know where his living body is, but we'll keep looking for him.

**QUESTION:** So who's, who's doing -- I mean, just basically these are individuals who are going out and doing the attacks?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** No, I think there's a level of coordination. I mean, you may have seen the news today. We have arrested two Iraqi generals of the former regime, and they had access to remnants of the old regime, and there are some outsiders that have come in. I don't know how many. You know, outsiders can't just come in and disappear into the population. The ones who are doing it, in my judgment, are principally the remnants of the old regime who have military training, have experience, and have a goal, an equity in not allowing democracy to take place.

**QUESTION:** Because Syria is quite, I'm sorry -- I have to go back to question one.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Yeah, we ought to do question one.

**QUESTION:** Because Syria, they come and they meet. At the same time, you appreciate the Syrians, they said, giving you access to information about the money Iraqis deposited in Syria banks. (A) Are you satisfied with the cooperation of the Syrians?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** We are satisfied that they have allowed our people to go in and examine some of the (inaudible) to return the money to the Iraqi people as soon as possible.

**QUESTION:** But what about your -- the Ambassador Black at the hearing when he said Syria, what they believe from intelligence information, there are activities gathering anti-Coalition in Syria itself against the U.S., military-wise?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** I'm not sure I saw exactly what Ambassador -- Cofer said.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador Black, yes.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Cofer Black?

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** I don't know exactly what he said, and without having seen his statement, I'd rather not make a fast comment on it.

**QUESTION:** And what about -- I have to pass by Saudi Arabia because I am Saudi and I; I got a question about it. Have you had any kind of face-to-face conversation with the Saudis? Because they still -- there are doubts in the minds of at least of the Saudis about your intention towards Saudi Arabia or what's going on?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** I met with Prince Saud Friday before last in Madrid. And I met with him also (inaudible) associates that have been in Iraq some 25 years. So I can say I stay in very close touch with Prince Saud. And they know the relationship that exists between the Crown Prince and President Bush. From time to time they communicate by letters.

We have encouraged our Saudi friends to do more with respect to terrorist activity, at least within the Kingdom, and they are. The bombings that took place earlier in the year the day that -- just before I arrived in Saudi Arabia, I think was a little bit of a shock to the Saudis and they have been doing a lot of work since. And I'm sure if the Saudi you have been following, the actions that you take to go after terrorists and to pick up, you know, munitions and all sorts of other terrible things that were all around the Kingdom.

And so the Saudis understand that this is a threat to the people of Saudi Arabia, and not just the source of the threat to the United States and other nations. I think the Saudis have also recognized that they can and should do more with respect to (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** Sir, I have to ask about the statement because today you are hosting the Iftaar for the Muslims, American Muslims. At the same time, we heard a lieutenant general at the Pentagon is talking about Islam as the Satan. Are we seeing, like, a war of ideas between inside the cabinet somebody is saying something bad and somebody is hosting Iftaar?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** We don't agree with what the general said. It's being looked into by the Inspector General. You heard the President speak to it. I've spoken to it. There's no place in our policy for (inaudible). The President made very clear, I mean within a few days that this is not a war against Islam, not a war against Muslims; this is a war against criminals and terrorists who sometimes hide behind their religion, but nevertheless, they're criminals and they are terrorists. So the President (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) Ambassadors (inaudible) okay, the Ambassadors, U.S. Ambassadors nowadays we see since, Mr. Powell, you are now their boss -- they are making comments and they are making quite a noise, like Ambassador to Egypt, Mr. Welch, your Ambassador in Saudi, and I think the new Ambassador going to Syria. Is the -- do the ambassadors have the right to speak up their minds, or is it a policy?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** They are representing policy and they are free to speak. I want them to speak. I was just with one of my ambassadors in Central America who made a lot of news. I won't mention the country, although it's no big secret. But people were talking about corruption in the government (inaudible) government fight corruption. She was speaking very consistently with these things I have said to that and the President of that country and the Foreign Minister. And when our Ambassadors are speaking consistent with our policy, I want them to speak out. They are not clerks. They are Chiefs of Mission. They are very senior Foreign Service people or political persons who have come into the service of the nation and are supposed to speak out.

I don't know if you have reference to a particular statement, but Ambassador Welch in Egypt is a great friend of Egypt, a great friend of the Egyptian people, and being a great friend sometimes means speaking out and saying things that maybe your friends didn't want to hear about. I did it earlier today with a great number of Chinese delegates in a conference at the Bush Library. And I said to them, "It is a sign of our friendship that I'm willing to tell you about the things you might rather not hear about, but as a friend I would rather speak candidly to you. I am your friend, so I will speak candidly to you."

**QUESTION:** The Mujahedin e-Kalq, they are in Iraq and the Iranians, they still hold the -- some of al-Qaida key members.

Are you willing to trade with the Iranians or negotiate?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Well, we have the MeK contained, and we have been watching the ones who are not negotiating in trade.

**QUESTION:** At the moment.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Everything is at the moment.

**QUESTION:** There is a possibility.

(Laughter.)

**SECRETARY POWELL:** I didn't say that.

(Laughter.)

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thanks.  
[End]

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