

Interview on Al Arabiya with Hisham Melhem

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MR. MELHEM: Sir, thank you. Some people argue that the Abu Ghraib abuse was symptomatic of flawed policy, a policy that blurred the differences between prisoners of wars and terrorists, that was somewhat dismissive or selective in its applications of Geneva Conventions. How would you deal with that? How would you deal with the people who say that also the war on terror was painted in stark terms, absolute evil versus absolute good, and that could have created the atmosphere for the abuse?

SECRETARY POWELL: I would disagree with that. What happened in Abu Ghraib was terrible, despicable behavior on the part of some of our men and women in uniform. But, you know, most of the people that we detained in Abu Ghraib were being handled according with the high -- accordingly with the highest standards -- in accordance with the highest standards one would expect our soldiers to use in dealing with people who are entrusted to our care.

And so we will see that justice is done for this group of soldiers and anyone else who might have been responsible, either by letting it happen or not knowing it was happening and they should have known it was happening. You will see American justice at work to bring these people to justice.

This is unconscionable. It is inconsistent with our value system. And we always treat people entrusted to us not just in accordance with the Geneva Convention, as appropriate; but because they are human beings and we are now their stewards, we have to take care of them. And this is unacceptable behavior and I hope that all of my friends in the Arab world will see how a democratic system, such as us, deals with this kind of problem.

Look already, court martials will be held next week. Six investigations are underway. Look at all of the congressional committees who are asking us questions about this. So justice will be done. This does not reflect the American value system.

MR. MELHEM: Sir, so how concerned are you that Abu Ghraib episode could undermine or maybe tarnish the Administration's attempt and its credibility in trying -- in trying to convince the Europeans and the Arabs to adopt its Greater Middle East Initiative for greater democracy and reform in the Arab world?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, there is no question that Abu Ghraib has hurt the United States. It's hurt our image around the world. We have to be honest about this. But I hope we will restore that image when people remember a couple of things: one, tens upon tens of thousands of our young men and women are doing good work helping to reconstruct the society, helping to put down people who want to deny democracy to the Iraqi people.

At the same time, our interest in the Greater Middle East Initiative stands on its own. It has its own foundation. And that foundation really begins with what we are hearing from the Arab world. The Arab world is saying, through reports that have been done by Arab intellectuals, that reform is needed throughout the Arab world. Each country has its own path to reform.

I am hopeful that the Arab ministers, when they met recently, and the information they provided to the leaders for the Arab summit, this will all result in an expression of a desire for reform on the part of the Arab world. And the United States, the G-8 nations, other nations of the world, stand ready to help Arab nations on their selected path of reform, their selected path into the future. We cannot impose. It is not for us to impose. It is for us to help our partners.

MR. MELHEM: Sir, what would you like the G-8 ministerial meeting to do, to achieve, concerning the initiative concerning Iraq or maybe even the Israeli-Palestinian issue?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, tomorrow I'll have all the G-8 ministers here in Washington and we will discuss Iraq, obviously. I'm sure we'll have a conversation about our plans to transfer sovereignty to the interim Iraqi government by the 1st of July. I'm sure we'll have a conversation about UN resolutions to support that.

We all want to see a UN resolution that provides legitimacy to this interim government, encourages nations to participate in the reconstruction effort in the multinational force, gives the UN an expanded role to get the country ready for elections. And I think all of my G-8 colleagues will be supportive of that.

We also, obviously, will talk about the reform effort. We'll take note of what the Arab League foreign ministers did this week. We'll take note of the different ideas that exist within the European Union and within the United States. And, hopefully, we'll have proposals that we can present to the G-8 summit leaders for them to help Arab leaders move forward down a path of reform.

MR. MELHEM: Sir, the Administration still insists that June 30th is the date when the United States will deliver sovereignty to the Iraqis. However, how realistic is this date, given the continued security challenges and also the continued political uncertainty in Iraq?

SECRETARY POWELL: I think it's still realistic. Ambassador Brahimi, the UN representative, has been over now for about a week. We are in daily contact with him. He's coming up with some good ideas. We are sharing names. He is assembling a list of names as to who might be in the government.

But even while we're waiting for his work to be finished, things are happening. Eleven cabinet ministries are now up and running and fully sovereign. They're in the hands of their cabinet ministers. And so we are not just waiting for Mr. Brahimi to finish his work. We are getting started now with the development of government institutions.

And I think if Mr. Brahimi finishes his work on the schedule that he has set for himself, by the end of May, then why shouldn't we be able to, at that time, announce who will be in the new government and then take the next several weeks of June to get the necessary UN resolutions and get them up and ready and prepared to assume responsibility for their country?

MR. MELHEM: Do you agree with Mr. Brahimi's position that most members of the current Iraqi Governing Council should not be members, including people like Ahmed Chalabi, should not be members in the new transitional government in Iraq?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, the members of the Governing Council will have an opportunity to speak to Mr. Brahimi about their views. It was always anticipated in the Administrative Law, the Transitional Administrative Law, that the Governing Council would no longer exist after sovereignty had been returned. So it shouldn't be surprising to anybody.

Where the different personalities on the Governing Council might end up, either back in private life or they might decide to run for office when the elections come or they may be selected for a position in one of the ministries or in some capacity, so I will let Mr. Brahimi and Ambassador Bremer and Iraqi leaders figure that out. I would not want to focus on any one personality.

MR. MELHEM: Sir, to stop the violence in Fallujah the United States handed security to a Fallujah Brigade "in part comprised, according to some news reports, of some Baathist insurgents." Could this be the model for other hotspots, such as Najaf? And what would that say about your previous policy of not dealing with members of the (inaudible) regime?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, what we're trying to do is to be very practical and realistic now. And there a number of individuals in the military and as teachers, doctors, who

were members of the Baath Party and really had to be members of the Baath Party in order to survive.

MR. MELHEM: Sure.

SECRETARY POWELL: And so, in a very realistic way, we are examining what they can now do to help us. And that's what we did in Fallujah with General Latif, who we brought in. He is doing a very good job in bringing together individuals from that community, from that province, to deal with the problem in Fallujah.

Now, whether that model can be replicated in other parts of the country, I can't tell you right now. There may be other parts of the country where you can't replicate a model like that; you have to take decisive action.

We are watching the situation unfold down in Najaf right now, where we're taking on the militia. And I hope that Muqtada al-Sadr will realize that it's time for him to turn himself over to Iraqi legal authorities to face the charges that are against him and end this problem in the south.

MR. MELHEM: So can one say that comprehensive de-Baathification was not necessarily a good idea?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, I think what we can say is having seen comprehensive de-Baathification, we realize that some corrections were appropriate. And that's why many thousands of teachers are returning to their jobs; many other professionals and skilled individuals who can help in the building of their country are returning to their jobs. But who we don't want to allow to come back into the society are those individuals who have blood on their hands, who essentially are responsible for the deprivations of the last 30 years.

MR. MELHEM: So, and the last question on Iraq: What will happen to the private contractors after June 30th? What kind of law will be applied to them?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, we would hope that the body of law that the Iraqi government will be operating under at that time would certainly apply to them. They are now inside of a sovereign country. Many of them will have a contractual relationship with the United States, if we are paying for it.

And so we will work out with the interim Iraqi government the proper relationship that we should have with private contractors. They may be working for us, but they have to be subject to the rules and laws of the country they're in.

MR. MELHEM: Sir, let me move to the Palestinian-Israeli arena. The meetings with Mr. Ahmed Qureia, with Dr. Rice, the meeting with Nabil Shaath, between you and Nabil

Shaath, what do they signify?

Are they -- do they signify an attempt by the Administration to contain the damage in the Arab world following the support for Mr. Sharon's approach to Gaza and the West Bank, as many people argue in the Arab world?

Does it signify the end of estrangement, if you will, with senior leadership?

SECRETARY POWELL: I never believe that I had entered into an estranged relationship with Prime Minister Abu Alaa, or my friend, Nabil Shaath, even during the heat, if we can put it that way, that hit us after Prime Minister Sharon's visit. I talked to Nabil Shaath. I talked to Prime Minister Abu Alaa. I'm looking forward this weekend to seeing the Prime Minister briefly in Jordan, as well as spending more time with Nabil Shaath.

What we're going to say to them is, look at what Prime Minister Sharon put on the table. We know that you have a level of disappointment about what we've said about a couple of final status issues. But look at what he put on the table: the evacuation of settlements. This is what we've been after for a long time.

So it's time for my Palestinian friends to start to study: How will we exercise political control over these evacuated properties? How will we use them to benefit the Palestinian people? What kind of security will we have there? And how can we use this to go aggressively down the path laid out by the roadmap?

So I hope that whatever disappointment existed is behind them, and they can now see the opportunities.

Remember, the President said his vision is intact, his vision of June of 2002, for a Palestinian state living side by side with the state of Israel, a contiguous, viable state. He also said that all final status issues have to be agreed between the two parties and not an outsider. And he also said the settlement must be based on 242 and 338, and it must follow the terms laid out in the roadmap.

This is what we all still are committed to. I think you've seen that in the Quartet statement, and you saw that in a statement the President made when King Abdullah was here last week.

MR. MELHEM: Sir, the President, according to his vision, as you said, talked about a Palestinian state by the year 2005. And yet, recently, he said that he does not necessarily expect that the state will be established by 2005. Is that -- what does that signify? I mean --

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, it signifies we would love to see a state established by 2005. A lot of work would have to be done to accomplish that goal. I think the President

was being realistic in that it is now May of 2004, and we have not made the kind of progress we expected when he first announced that goal in 2002.

So I think he was just adding a realistic element to the discussion. But I can tell you, if we could get this going, if we could get some progress going, the President would do everything in his power to try to make this happen in 2005. But we have to be realistic.

MR. MELHEM: I want to move to Syria, but quickly on the settlements. If the Palestinians deliver a little bit on security, would you push Mr. Sharon to deliver on outposts -- illegal outposts and settlements?

SECRETARY POWELL: Yes. If we end the terror -- the terror must be ended. I have worked on this now for three years, and President Clinton and his team worked on it before we came here. There must be an end to the terror that was associated with the Intifadah. If that happens, you are essentially saying to the Israelis: "We ended the terror. Now you must perform under the terms of the roadmap." And you give the United States enormous opportunity to help the Palestinian people and to help the Israelis move down the path of the roadmap.

It's -- I've always found it completely, completely un-understandable, difficult to understand for me, why the Palestinians don't take this opportunity to end terror and challenge Israel to perform according to the roadmap and to press the United States to do that.

MR. MELHEM: On Syria, sir. The President signed an Executive Order imposing new additional sanctions on Syria that went a little bit beyond the Syria Accountability Act and threatened more sanctions. What kind of sanctions are we talking about in the future?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, you know, the Syria Accountability Act was a piece of legislation that I told the Syrians last year would be coming along unless there was some performance on their part to shut down the activities of Hezbollah and other similar -- Hamas and Hezbollah and other similar organizations in Damascus, and to take certain other actions with respect to their programs of weapons of mass destruction and the movement of people in and out of Iraq.

But we didn't see the kind of movement on the part of Syria that I would like to have seen. And, as a result, our Congress, after waiting a while, passed the Act. And I am required, as is the President, as agents of our government, to put the Act into effect with the sanctions that were announced.

We have no additional plans right now, but there are other sanctions that are available.

MR. MELHEM: So your new Ambassador to Lebanon said that the time has come for the Syrian army to remove from Lebanon and that Syria should not be allowed to select, as he put it, the new president of Lebanon. Would you like to reiterate that, go beyond

that?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, doesn't that seem like a very reasonable statement? I mean, Syria has had its army in Lebanon for a long time. I don't know that we're advocating a precipitous withdrawal of any kind. And shouldn't the Lebanese people be absolutely free to select as their president anyone they wish to have as their president through free, open, fair voting? That's what reform is about and that's what we believe freedom of expression and will and democracy are all about.

MR. MELHEM: I'm told one minute and I know you're pressed. Some would argue that the new sanctions on Syria now may complicate the American position in Iraq. Do you buy that?

SECRETARY POWELL: I don't think so. I think it's strictly a matter between the United States and Syria, and I think people will see that it does not complicate our situation in Iraq. We are still working with the Syrians trying to do a better job of sealing the border. An open border where terrorists go back and forth is not in Syria's interest, nor is it in our interest, and that's what we're trying to persuade them so that we can find ways to cooperate more effectively on sealing the border.

And they know what we think they ought to do in order to demonstrate to the world that they are acting in a responsible way. And when I went there last year, I laid out a series of items to President -- to the President that I wanted him to act on. And we're still waiting for action.

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