

Interview With Mouafac Harb of Al-Hurra

Secretary Colin L. Powell

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MR. HARB: Thank you, Mr. Secretary, for giving us some time to speak to our viewers on Al-Hurra.

SECRETARY POWELL: My pleasure.

MR. HARB: Let me start by Afghanistan. Last week, it was the first time Afghanistan had held its first presidential election. What kind of lessons have you learned from what happened in Afghanistan? First, on how the U.S. should promote democracy and political reforms in the world; and second, on the war on terror.

SECRETARY POWELL: So many people said that, well, Afghanistan can't have free, democratic elections, it's inconsistent with their history. But look what happened, look what they did. People started lining up at three o'clock in the morning. There was a bridge that was blown down by the Taliban, and people found a ford to cross the river because they wanted to vote, and they were barefoot standing in the snow. Women, totally covered in their burka; nevertheless, their hand came out with a ballot to put that ballot into the ballot box.

And so the people of Afghanistan showed us over the weekend that democracy applies anywhere in the world where people are given the opportunity to practice it. And so, this was a very successful election. I mean, just the pictures alone tell you what the people of Afghanistan want.

Now, who made this happen? First, the Afghan people made it happen by registering in so many numbers; ten million of them registered and hundreds of thousands in Pakistan and Iran also registered to vote. The UN helped with this; the International Security Assistance Force helped with this; the United States helped with this; the coalition helped with it; but above all, the Afghan Government themselves.

And I think this is illustrative of what is possible in other parts of the world, certainly illustrative of what can happen in Iraq. The Taliban and al-Qaida said that they would stop this election, that they would not let people vote. People said, "We're going to vote."

Well, I think the same thing can happen in Iraq. We have a difficult insurgency there, we are

fighting that insurgency, we are fighting the terrorists, but I believe the people of Iraq want the same thing the people of Afghanistan and people in so many nations want: the opportunities to step forward and decide who will be their future leaders and to decide that by a vote.

MR. HARB: Before we go onto Iraq, my second -- the second part of my question, how is that helping the war on terror? What --

SECRETARY POWELL: It helps the war on terror because it now says to the terrorists who might be trying to find a haven in Afghanistan again that the Afghan people don't want any part of this. The Afghan people want freely elected leaders. They want a democracy. They want to build their schools, their homes, their communities back. They want to get their crops going. They want to end the drug trade. They want the same thing all of us want, and terrorists cannot find fertile ground in this environment, because the people of Afghanistan now are speaking, and they know that now, that the terrorists and the Taliban and al-Qaida are their enemies, as well as the enemies of others in the world, to include the United States. So I think it is a direct blow against the terrorists.

MR. HARB: I did not plan this question, but since you were describing that beautiful picture of, you know, women in Afghanistan wearing the burka and then casting a vote, and then you hear that some Saudi officials would say women are unlikely to be allowed to participate in elections in Saudi Arabia. What's your reaction to that?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, this is the choice that the Saudi Government has to make. I think women should be allowed. As you know, we have universal suffrage in our country. These things have to come in due course, and still waiting to see whether that is the final official position of the Saudi Government.

I do know that Saudi women had hoped that they would be able to vote in these municipal elections, which are -- it's novel that the Saudis are having elections in the first place, and they'll have to decide at what pace they can move, and I think ultimately, in every society in the world, women have to be able to play their full role.

MR. HARB: Moving to Iraq now, do you feel confident that general elections will take place in Iraq?

SECRETARY POWELL: I believe that general elections will take place at the end of January of 2005, but I don't underestimate this insurgency. It is a difficult insurgency that we are involved in, and that's why we are working hard to build up Iraqi forces as fast as we can, so that increasingly, they can work with the coalition in putting down this insurgency.

We have had success in places like Samarra, Najaf, Kufa, and other communities. We now see in Sadr city, in Baghdad, that there is some political progress taking place, and we see weapons being turned in.

So we need more of that. We need to take back all of these cities in the Sunni triangle that

insurgents have control or trying to gain control over in order to create circumstances that allow us to have a full, free, open, fair election. There's no reason we can't do that by the end of January.

MR. HARB: There have been some reports that certain factions in Iraq may not participate in the elections or may call to boycott the elections. Are you concerned that this may lead to certain groups called for breakaway entities in Iraq?

SECRETARY POWELL: We will be unsupportive of any effort to break Iraq into its parts. The people of Iraq don't want to be broken into their constituent parts -- a country in the north, a country in the center and a country in the south. None of these would be viable. And when the Transitional Administrative Law was being written earlier in the year, it provides for a system that respects the rights of all of the Iraqi people, whether they're Kurds, Sunnis, Turkomen, Shias, you name it. But it has to be one single country.

Now, of course, many political figures are speaking out as to whether they will support, won't support. That's the democratic political process. We heard the same thing in Afghanistan about who would run, who wouldn't run, who was going to accept the election results, who won't accept the election results. So we'll be seeing lots of these reports.

But when election is actually scheduled to take place, you'll see everybody start focusing on how they can win that election, and how they can be represented by such an election. I wouldn't pay too much attention to --

MR. HARB: Would you be willing to make a clear statement that the U.S. will oppose any attempt on any faction, to -- that would violate the integrity --

SECRETARY POWELL: It's not for the U.S. to oppose or impose. It's for the Iraqi Interim Government. This is a sovereign nation. They have a government led by Prime Minister Allawi and President Sheikh Ghazi. And they will have the skill and the ability to work out the different political contingents and different political forces that are operating within Iraq.

MR. HARB: How do you describe the situation in the borders with -- of Iraq with Syria and Iran?

SECRETARY POWELL: It is still a very porous border, and we are still concerned that the terrorists and materiel are coming across the border. We have had some relatively positive discussions with the Syrians over the last several weeks. We have had a couple of delegations go to Damascus. We had a military, U.S. military delegation in Damascus not too long ago talking to Syrian authorities, and Prime Minister Allawi has been in contact with the Syrians. And the Syrians have said they would work with us and with the Iraqis to do more to seal the border.

But it is a very porous border. I'm not sure it will ever be totally sealed, but we can do more than we are doing now and we hope that this new attitude on the part of the Syrians will produce results.

MR. HARB: This new attitude, how would you rate it right now? Where are we?

SECRETARY POWELL: I think it is one thing to have meetings and meetings go well, but it is another thing to see action on the ground. And so we will measure Syrian attitudes in terms of their behavior, not just their attitudes. We have to see action on the ground to help seal the border. The Syrians are doing some other things that are a little more positive with respect to financial transactions and financial presence in Damascus.

So we are open to discussions with the Syrians. We're having those discussions. But at the same time, we will measure Syria by its actions and not just discussions.

MR. HARB: Any reason to believe that there is -- have you detected any change in their behavior recently? Positive, negative --

SECRETARY POWELL: Just the fact that in these meetings they have been more forthcoming than they have been in previous meetings, and there has been a new seriousness of purpose in these discussions but discussions are not action. We measure results by action not discussion.

MR. HARB: You have requested from the Syrians to disarm Hezbollah and Hamas and the Lebanese already to the border with Israel. At the same time, you've supported the resolution calling all Syrian troops to withdraw from Lebanon. Which ones you want to come first, I mean?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, we would like to see them both happen right away. We believe and we were the cosponsors of the resolution, along with the French and others, and we believe that it is time for the Lebanese to be able to determine their own future and not with the presence of the Syrian army, who are being directed from Damascus.

We also believe strongly that if Damascus wants to play a more helpful role in resolving the Middle East peace problem between Israel and the Palestinians, then it should not allow its capital to be serving as a place where terrorist organizations can be located and can control terrorist actions that are taking place in the territories. It's inconsistent with the desire for peace. It's inconsistent with the desire for progress and for finding a comprehensive solution to the Middle East crisis, which would benefit Syria, as well as the Israelis and the Palestinians.

MR. HARB: In the piece from the early days of this Administration, you were quoted as saying you insisted, that you -- insisted, then that position evolved to Bush in Prague; and then we have the Mitchell report, the George Tenet working plan, the roadmap, the disengagement -- a lot of things on the table but nothing is moving. Why is that?

SECRETARY POWELL: Unfortunately, it's a pattern. It's not just in this Administration, it's a pattern from previous administrations, where President Clinton invested so much in the peace process. And as he has said publicly and in his memoirs, he was frustrated that he

wasn't able to achieve progress. We came in and we pushed the Mitchell Plan and we tried the Tenet Plan, the Zinni Plan, and now we have the roadmap. The roadmap is there. It is alive and well and ready to be executed. But what we need is what the President said last year at the summit in Aqaba, what we need now is performance on the part of the two sides.

And on the Palestinian side, we need the end of terror. As long as there is some support for terrorist activity, we will always be running into difficulty. We need firm action on the part of the Palestinians to bring terror under control, to end it. We need a reformed Palestinian leadership. We have made that clear from the beginning. We don't believe that President Arafat represents that kind of responsible Palestinian leadership, and that's why we're looking for an empowered prime minister.

Abu Mazen was not able to do it. Abu Alaa has not been given the authority he needs from the Palestinian legislature or from Chairman Arafat. Israel also has its obligations under the roadmap with respect to eliminating the outposts, with respect to settlement activity, and we are in touch with them. And so we all believe, the European Union, the Secretary General, the Russian Federation and the United States, that the roadmap is the way forward.

It's also something that's been endorsed by Israel and by the Palestinians. It's waiting. What we need now is action, and especially we need action on the Palestinian side to end terror and to reform its government so that we have a responsible interlocutor to work with us and to work with Israel.

MR. HARB: Libya. The European Union decided to lift the arms embargo on Libya. Would the U.S. consider such an embargo to be lifted any time soon?

SECRETARY POWELL: We still have issues with Libya. It's still on our list of terrorist states and we have to work our way through these issues. We're very pleased at the progress we have made over the past eight or nine months with Libya getting rid of its weapons of mass destruction capability. We've been able to open a new dialogue with Libya. We now have a diplomatic presence there and we've removed some of these sanctions that were in place.

We'll slowly work our way through this with Libya over time, and we are anxious to keep moving in a positive direction to normalize relations, but it will have to be done over time and only after all issues with Libya have been cleared up and resolved. But we're pleased that Libya made the strategic choice to get rid of these weapons of mass destruction and that Libya is demonstrating a new attitude with respect to its position in the international community.

MR. HARB: Are there any lessons learned from the Libyan experience that can be applied to Iraq?

SECRETARY POWELL: The biggest lesson from the Libyan experience, whether Iran or, say, North Korea take this lesson to heart, is that Mr. Qadhafi realized that acquiring weapons of mass destruction did not make Libya more secure, it made Libya less secure

and made Libya an outcast in the international community. And so he made a very strong and bold decision to get rid of them.

He also realized that international pressure was getting more intense and now people are thinking about investing in Libya. People are going to see what can be done to fix the hospital system, to fix its oil infrastructure. And so you get more from getting rid of weapons of mass destruction than acquiring them.

MR. HARB: But aren't you concerned that certain countries are learning how to blackmail the West -- you acquire WMD and then you go and say, "I'm giving up my WMD in return to rejoin the international community"? How would you answer those who --

SECRETARY POWELL: No, Libya hasn't blackmailed us. Libya has gotten rid of some weapons systems that cost it a great deal of money in order to have a more normal relationship with the international community. That isn't blackmail. Now, there are some nations who are looking strictly for payment for doing things that they shouldn't, not doing things that they shouldn't be doing, in the first place. And we have seen this before with North Korea.

And in the case of North Korea, we want to have a different kind of relationship. We think we can help the North Korean people, but we've got to get rid of their weapons of mass destruction. They said they're willing to get rid of their weapons of mass destruction.

They're asking for security guarantees, which the six-party framework can provide, and they want to know what they will receive in terms of economic benefits. Well, there will be economic benefits when we are not -- no longer dealing with a nation that is moving in the direction of having more nuclear weapons than they may already have now.

MR. HARB: Last question. If you were given the choice, would you like to serve a second term?

SECRETARY POWELL: (Laughter.) I don't have a term.

MR. HARB: If the President was to be reelected, would you like to stay?

SECRETARY POWELL: The President serves a term. I serve at the pleasure of the President, which is the only answer I can give, and I'm quite confident President Bush will have a second term.

MR. HARB: Thank you very much.

SECRETARY POWELL: Thank you.

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