



Interview on The Charlie Rose Show

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

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CHARLIE ROSE: Welcome to the broadcast. Tonight, a conversation with Nick Burns. He is the undersecretary for political affairs at the U.S. State Department.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

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CHARLIE ROSE: This is the time of the revolution.

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CHARLIE ROSE: **Nicholas Burns** is here. He is undersecretary for political affairs at the State Department. He's also the top U.S. negotiator on Iran. Since December 2006, the Security Council has adopted two U.N. resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program. Tehran in response has not halted its uranium enrichment activities. Last week, the Security Council of the United Nations was expected to proceed to a third round of sanctions. Instead, the six key nations and the E.U. agreed to delay a new resolution until November. Nick Burns was part of those discussions, and I am pleased to have him on this broadcast to give us an update.

Welcome. It's great to see you.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you Charlie. Great to be back.

CHARLIE ROSE: So, we all expected that coming out of this session in the U.N., where you had a chance to talk

to everybody, there would be an acknowledged next round of sanctions that might be productive in sending a message to Iran. It didn't happen.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We got halfway there. We have an agreement with the Russians and Chinese and the Europeans that we are going to put together a third sanctions resolution, under Chapter 7. And that has the advantage of everyone has to apply that. And we said that we were going to vote that resolution in the month of November, about six weeks from now, unless Mohamed ElBaradei, who's negotiating with the Iranians on the technical aspects of their program, and Javier Solana, our lead European diplomat, unless they can show that they're making positive progress with the Iranians. So I think Secretary Rice was able to get that much done.

But you know, this is a obviously a product of a compromise among six very different nations. If the United States had its way, we would have voted on those sanctions several months ago, but we've got to work in terms of this larger international (inaudible)...

CHARLIE ROSE: But the conventional wisdom is that the Russians and especially the Chinese were not prepared to go there.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think that's right. Russia and China want to give diplomacy, at least ElBaradei's diplomacy, a little bit more time to work. We say to them, look, sanctions are an instrument of diplomacy, and the Iranians are accelerating their efforts at Natanz, where they're doing the enrichment research.

CHARLIE ROSE: Right. Right.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And they've defied the Security Council resolutions that we put together. We, Russia, China, the United States and Europe.

And so therefore, to make the U.N. credible and the Security Council credible, we've got to back up our actions, our words with some actions. And so, we are pressing the Chinese and Russians towards a third resolution, because we want to stay on a diplomatic track. We want to give diplomacy a chance to succeed, but diplomacy has to be credible to succeed in this instance.

CHARLIE ROSE: Do the Russians and the Chinese believe that the Iranians want to build a nuclear weapon?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I have been working for two-and-a-half years with the Russians and Chinese and the Europeans and lots of other countries on this effort to try to constrain the Iranians and prevent them from becoming nuclear capable. I have never had a private conversation with any diplomat from any country where that person said we don't believe Iran is trying to create a nuclear weapons capability. Everybody assumes that they are.

And so, it's our task to try to build a big international coalition with a lot of different countries to try to focus the spotlight on what the Iranians are doing, and to make it worthwhile to the Iranians to stop. If diplomacy is going to succeed, there has to be something in it for Iran. And we've tried this.

(CROSSTALK)

CHARLIE ROSE: And what's in it for Iran to negotiate?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, you take them at their word. You had President Ahmadinejad on this program a week ago. What the Iranians say is, we're not interested in nuclear weapons, we're interested in civil nuclear power.

CHARLIE ROSE: Right.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We need electricity for our people. Well, that's understandable. So what we did, Russia, China, the United States and Europe, we went to them a year-and-a-half ago and said, we'll build you an international civil nuclear .

CHARLIE ROSE: I raised that issue with him. He says they've broken contracts before and the contract is not sufficient.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I think it's an odd thing for him to say, Ahmadinejad to say, when you've got Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao and George Bush and all the European leaders saying the same thing. The group of us will form a consortium. We'll build you nuclear power stations. We'll ship in the nuclear fuel. We'll take out the spent fuel. We'll do that for you. And if you're genuinely interested in your people's economic development .

CHARLIE ROSE: But what's the guarantee that it'll happen? It would be their argument they would make, that something .

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I think -- I think that if in the full glare of international publicity, the five permanent members of the Security Council make a commitment and sign an agreement, you can count on us to keep our word.

CHARLIE ROSE: Some people are beginning to say, you know, we could contain them. It's not the end of the world if, in fact, Iran has nuclear weapons.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think that's absolutely wrong. Absolutely wrong. I know there are people, there are some people outside our government .

CHARLIE ROSE: Americans, too.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes. Outside our government, have argued this to me. Here's why it's wrong. Iran with a nuclear weapons capability is a game-changer in terms of the balance of power in the Middle East. We don't want Iran to have the kind of power in the Middle East that could potentially dominate Lebanon, which they're trying to do now through their agent Hezbollah .

CHARLIE ROSE: Right.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: . or pose an existential threat to our ally Israel, or pose a basic security threat over the long term to all of our friends in the Gulf -- Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman -- as well as

the moderate states like Jordan and Egypt.

Iran with nuclear weapons changes the balance of power against America`s interests and against the interest of the moderate Arabs and of Israel. And so .

CHARLIE ROSE: But let me understand, though. Is it -- changes the balance of power because they have nuclear weapons, but does -- is the fear that it would set off a nuclear proliferation so that everybody in the region would have nuclear weapons and therefore -- and therefore -- any least little thing could blow everything up.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Certainly one concern is that an Iranian nuclear weapon capability might lead others in the region who have the means .

CHARLIE ROSE: Right.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: . to purchase a nuclear weapons .

CHARLIE ROSE: Right.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: . capability to do it. But also, we have to look at the actions of the present Iranian government, the theocracy that runs Iran since 1979, what they`re capable of. Right now, they are arming and financing Hezbollah against the democratically elected government in Lebanon. They`re arming and financing Hamas against Israel. They`re arming and financing Shia militants who are turning their fire against American soldiers. A lot of these IEDs .

CHARLIE ROSE: Right.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: . these sophisticated devices killing and wounding American soldiers are supplied by Iran, given to the Shia militant groups. And the Iranians are arming -- beginning to arm and finance the Taliban in Afghanistan in a real reversal of Iranian policy. So, think of the greater Middle East.

CHARLIE ROSE: The Taliban were their arch enemy earlier.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Exactly. But think, Charlie, of the greater Middle East, as certainly as I do, as the area of the world of greatest concern, of vital concern to the United States. Which country is opposing us at every turn? Which country is financing and arming all the groups that are against peace? It`s Iran.

CHARLIE ROSE: Towards what means? Towards what goal? What is their goal? What is their ambition? What do they want to accomplish?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think that what we`re seeing now in Tehran is a highly ideological government and a radical government, which is very different from the Iranian government of President Khatami, the predecessor to President Ahmadinejad. Khatami was a reformer. A lot of people felt that there was a chance to work with him.

Ahmadinejad and the people around him are trying to take Iran back to the original roots and ideological fervor of the revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini, and so they are trying to build up Iran's power in the Middle East and to make Iran the dominant power in the Middle East.

And I think it will be a challenge for the next generation of Americans to try to have a peaceful relationship with Iran, to try to resolve problems by diplomacy if that's possible, but also to maintain American power in the Middle East, because we are a factor for stability largely over time in the Middle East. The Iranians will not be that way.

CHARLIE ROSE: They will not be what way? They will not be .

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: The Iranians are not interested in preserving the status quo in the Middle East that is positive, meaning the arrangement of states that are moderate, that are seeking trade and investment relations with the United States and Europe, that may help us to lead to peace with Israel, that may help us to assist the Israelis and Palestinians in creating an independent Palestinian state. That's not the Iranian agenda. The Iranian agenda is very different from that, and therefore, very much contrary to our long-term interest.

CHARLIE ROSE: Have we missed opportunities to have some kind of dialogue with them?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I wouldn't -- I wouldn't put all the onus on the United States.

CHARLIE ROSE: No, no, they may have too, but I'm talking to you.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I would say the two countries have failed since 1979, 28 years .

CHARLIE ROSE: This is time of the revolution.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: To have -- the time of the revolution, when they took the 52 American hostages and held them in captivity for 444 days. Since that time, both countries have failed to have any kind of meaningful dialogue whatsoever. It's the most unusual diplomatic relationship that the United States has in the world today.

CHARLIE ROSE: Are they our most extreme enemy?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Enemy is a strong word.

CHARLIE ROSE: OK, that's why I'm using it.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think they're an adversary of the United States, an adversary because .

CHARLIE ROSE: The Iranians are not an enemy of the United States.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, enemy, adversary. Usually you think about an enemy .

CHARLIE ROSE: Yes.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: . as a country that you`re fighting in strict diplomatic terms. You are fighting in an armed conflict. We`re not doing that with Iran right now, but they are a country that is absolutely opposed to everything that we are trying to accomplish in the Middle East, from Iraq to a Palestinian peace, to stability in Afghanistan.

And so I think the great challenge for our diplomacy now -- and it will be true of the next administration when it comes in in 2009 -- is to find a way forward where we can effectively block Iran`s basic interest in the Middle East, but also probably find a way to try to engage them in some kind of a construct where we can have a peaceful, diplomatic solution to the many problems that they pose.

CHARLIE ROSE: OK. I want to read you from a piece that is in "The New Yorker" by Sy Hersh: He says that "The president and his senior advisers have concluded that their campaign to convince the American public that Iran poses an imminent nuclear threat has failed, unlike a similar campaign before the Iraq War, and that as a result, there is not enough popular vote for the major bombing campaign," that would be to take out the nuclear.

"The second development is that the White House had come to terms, in private, with the general consensus of the American intelligence community that Iran is at least five years away from obtaining a bomb.

And finally" -- and this is what I`m underlining -- "and finally, there`s been a growing recognition in Washington and throughout the Middle East that Iran is emerging as the geopolitical winner of the war in Iraq."

I`ve heard that frequently. The Iraq -- the winner of the Iraqi war is Iran. For a lot of reasons, including the fact that we have been so bogged down there, or whatever words you want to use, that we`re not able to pursue our interests in lots of different ways.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think it remains to be seen whether Iran is going to emerge the victor because of the conflict in Iraq itself. The fact is .

CHARLIE ROSE: Saddam was their big enemy.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Saddam was.

CHARLIE ROSE: And we .

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: No question about it. I mean, I think from a purely balance of power prospective, if you`re an Iranian sitting in Tehran, the world might look better in a simplistic way, because Saddam -- Saddam is gone, and because the Taliban had been removed power.

But look what`s happening now. Iran is now beginning to reengage the Taliban, because they don`t get along as well with the coalition of countries that are influential in Afghanistan, and they`re not doing what they should to be friendly to President Karzai.

In Iraq, Iran has an excellent relationship with many of the Shia leaders, but not so good at all with the Sunni and Kurdish leaders. And so, I don't think it's inevitable.

CHARLIE ROSE: But why they don't have good relationship with the Sunni and Kurdish leaders, because for the most part they gave, you know, they gave a safe haven to the Shiite leaders who were.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Iran has to live beside Iraq for the next several generations. Iran has to learn that it can't just reach out to the Shia population and the Shia leadership. It's also got to work with the other groups that will be fundamental in the makings of any future Iraqi government. So, in that sense, I'm not sure that we can say today that Iran is the inevitable victor in the conflict in Iraq.

CHARLIE ROSE: The idea was .

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think that could change very quickly.

CHARLIE ROSE: The idea was in the beginning that we create a democratic Iraq, that will be competitive with Iran.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes. Well, you know, we're trying very hard to stabilize Iraq, and we hope to see a democracy be built there and be able to govern there over a long period of time. It remains to be seen if that will be the case, but I just think that the Iranians cannot assume that somehow the short-term gains they may perceive to have achieved over the last few years will continue if they aren't more ecumenical, Charlie, if they don't reach out to the other factions that are going to have a big say in the future of Iraq -- the Sunni leadership and the Kurdish leadership -- and they haven't done that yet.

CHARLIE ROSE: What's your fear, that somehow there is going to be throughout the Middle East a great conflict between Shiites represented by Iran and perhaps a government in Iraq, and Sunnis, represented by principally Saudi Arabia?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, it's obviously in the long-term interests of the United States to prevent such a conflict from occurring. And I would say even in the wider Muslim world -- the Muslim population of India is the second largest in the world.

CHARLIE ROSE: Sure.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And it's heavily Shia-represented. We don't want to see India destabilize because of a larger Shia-Sunni rivalry in the greater Middle East that will extend into South Asia.

And I think the Iranians have to be careful here. There is a revolutionary firebrand quality to the rhetoric of Ahmadinejad and his foreign minister, Mr. Mottaki, and they've got to watch what they say and watch what they do, because what's happening in the Middle East today is a lot of countries have their backs up about Iran. Ahmadinejad plays to the street about the Palestinian cause, but if you go in and talk to the leaders of these countries, the Arab countries, they are not comfortable with this brand of radicalism in a nearby country.

CHARLIE ROSE: Well, they feel threatened by him.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: They do, and they don't want to see their region destabilized.

So it's got to be one of our primary interests to maintain American power and presence in the Middle East through the Iraq conflict and beyond, so that we can be a force for stability, because that's in our interest, and that's in the interest of our friends.

CHARLIE ROSE: Sy Hersh raises the point that there is contingency planning, there's serious planning at the Pentagon to attack not the nuclear sites, but to attack wherever these -- the source of the Revolutionary Guards, or whoever is responsible for sending those IED devices or whatever they're sending into Iraq.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Charlie, I haven't read his piece yet. I've got it in my hotel room. I'm going to read it tonight after I see you. But I can tell you this: We have been in this administration for two and one half years embarked on diplomacy. I do not believe that we've exhausted diplomacy. I think there's far more that we can do to try to arrange a peaceful settlement of this dispute. I do not believe a war with Iran is inevitable.

Now, the president, quite properly, has never taken the military action off the table, and he shouldn't, because it's part of the.

CHARLIE ROSE: Nor have the French.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And the French haven't. You heard President Sarkozy say the same thing. And they shouldn't take it off the table, because part of the leverage that you bring to.

CHARLIE ROSE: But if you listen to Saudi Arabia and people -- and those countries in there, they say if we do that, if that takes place, it will release all kinds of consequences that would be just awful.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I was trying to make that -- a different point. You're always prepared to defend your national interests. You don't take that option off the table as a great power, but the United States is looking for peace in the Middle East.

We have this really tough challenge, historic challenge in Iraq. We have the problem of trying to support Prime Minister Siniora and help he and his government surmount this major difficulty in Lebanon. There is the problem of trying to create an Israeli-Palestinian peace, which Secretary of State Rice is working on very, very hard.

And so, it's a time when we ought to want to see stability in the Middle East, not conflict. And what I'm saying is, that we have shown a lot of patience. Diplomacy requires patience, and sometimes you have to plot your moves a year or two out.

And so, I hope we don't give up on diplomacy. I don't think this administration will, and I think we've shown our real interest in pursuing it.

CHARLIE ROSE: OK, here's what really interests me, and is what circumstances might cause the Iranian government,

the existing government - - because it is not monolithic, you know.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Exactly right.

CHARLIE ROSE: Larijani doesn't believe everything that Ahmadinejad does, correct?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Correct.

CHARLIE ROSE: You guys have intelligence on that. You know that. What kind of pressure might make them, either external or internal, say, you know, we need in the interests of our people, in the interests of our national security, in the interests of the future, a new -- a new environment with the United States, and with the West and with our neighbors?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think it's more economic pressure than anything else, because Iran, unlike North Korea, is not a country that wants to live in isolation. They require investment and trade with Europe.

CHARLIE ROSE: Right, right.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: . with the Middle East, and with Asia. Those are the three lifelines into Iran today. And if we can convince the European countries -- and they're heading down this road, led by President Sarkozy - - to put their own individual sanctions on Iran, and if we can get Japan and South Korea to lower their economic exposure, which both of the are trying to do, I think the Iranians will begin to understand that this irresponsible drive towards a nuclear weapons capability has engendered a reaction against them.

And so, I think it's the economic pressure that we need to see, through U.N. Security Council sanctions, through E. U. sanctions, and through private banks shutting down their operations, as four major European banks did over the past summer.

CHARLIE ROSE: "The New York Times" wrote -- or a reporter at the "New York Times" wrote perspective, I thought, an interesting piece about him, suggesting that he -- that the people within Iran wonder why we have built him up so much, that we take advantage of these outrageous statements that he makes about everything.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, it is an interesting phenomenon, because, as you know and I know, the power in Iran is not President Ahmadinejad. It's the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. And power is diffused in that governing structure. As you said, Charlie, absolutely correct, it's not a monolith. There are four or five competing centers for power. So Ahmadinejad is an actor, but in terms of the foreign policy of the Iranian state, it's more the supreme leader, and probably Dr. Ali Larijani, the national security adviser, who really hold most of the day-to-day decision-making.

CHARLIE ROSE: Is his popularity in Iran going up or down?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, our sense is -- and I say -- I'm a little bit humble in trying to figure out what is happening. We have no embassy there. We have no journalists there. We have no business people there. Our sense is that his popularity has crested.

And you know, he was seen when he came in in August .

CHARLIE ROSE: As an economic reformer.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: As a reformer, as someone who had a common touch, who drove an old car, who lived in a modest apartment, who understood the average person.

CHARLIE ROSE: And who was not corrupt.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And was not corrupt. But he hasn't fulfilled -- he hasn't come through on most of his economic promises. So our sense is, there's a high degree of dissatisfaction with him. His party did not do well in the last elections, and the prognostication is -- prognosis is, they won't do well in the next one.

CHARLIE ROSE: There is also this thing, which I've always been intrigued by. Everybody says that even reformers, even people who want to change the government, have a strong nationalistic feeling about the nuclear program. The question I don't know is do they have a strong nationalistic program about developing a nuclear weapon or simply developing nuclear technology?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, that's the key question. And what we know about Iranians and about Iran is that they're immensely proud of their country. They're nationalistic.

CHARLIE ROSE: And should be.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And they should be. It's a great.

CHARLIE ROSE: A great history and a great culture.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: It's one of the great civilizations of the world.

CHARLIE ROSE: Exactly.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And so, it seems to us that the idea of nuclear power, civil nuclear power, is something that gives people a lot of pride, because it's a signal -- or it will be a signal and a symbol of advancement.

But it's not at all clear that if the Iranian people understand the price of obtaining a nuclear weapons capability, they'd be willing to pay that price.

CHARLIE ROSE: Because of the free media -- because they don't know that? They don't understand that? They don't have a discussion of that?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, they don't have a free media. And people who stand up and voice alternative

views are normally locked up in Iran. So it's not the kind of pluralistic, open debating society that I think Iran deserves to have.

But our indications are that when you talk to Iranians about the fact that investment channels will be shut down, that trade will diminish, that their country will become a pariah in the international system, as it is in the U.N. system, that most Iranians don't want to pay that price. Ahmadinejad may want to pay that price, but not the average Iranian.

CHARLIE ROSE: OK. What do you think their perception of us is? Do we have any way of changing it if it is...

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We have an enormously complicated relationship.

CHARLIE ROSE: Going back to the shah and support and the revolution that brought the shah to power.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And before that. And before that.

CHARLIE ROSE: Which they all know we engineered.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Iranians believe we engineered a coup against their government in 1953. It's part of the historic lore.

CHARLIE ROSE: We did. We did.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And Iranians -- well, I'm not -- I didn't deny it. I'm just saying, this is what they believe.

CHARLIE ROSE: I mean, they take pride in that. It's one of the great, according.

(CROSSTALK)

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Iranians believe that we were an opponent of the Ayatollah Khomeini. And so, I think that most Iranians obviously understand that there's been this enormously conflicted relationship with the United States.

We're a big powerful country. We invaded two countries that are neighbors to them, contiguous to them, Afghanistan and Iraq, over the last six years. And so there's obviously an element of insecurity when the Iranian government or the average Iranian looks out at the United States.

And what I think our task is, to break through some of those myths. So what we have been trying to do over the last year -- we sent our wrestling team, the U.S. national wrestling team to Iran. It's the most popular sport. It's their national support. Our team was received with rapture. Very polite, enthusiastic applause. We've tried to bring Iranian educators and disaster relief experts and museum curators here to the United States, 200 people over the last years, not many. But just to kind of break down these personal barriers that have separated Iranians and Americans for two generations now.

CHARLIE ROSE: I still wonder what their perception is. You know, I mean, this whole business, this obscenity he says about the Holocaust and we need to study it.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: It's horrific.

CHARLIE ROSE: It is horrific. But I don't know whether he believes that, or, B, he's just so -- the idea of Zionism and the hostility to Zionism...

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes.

CHARLIE ROSE: The hostility to the creation of the Israeli state is such an anathema to him that anything that he can latch on to that questions that creation of the Israeli state causes him to use every kind of rhetorical point he can.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Nothing has done Ahmadinejad greater damage in the West than his remarks on the Holocaust and on Israel. I saw the reaction it had in Germany against him and in France and in Britain. And I don't think he's worldly enough to understand that, because he came here to the United States last week and began to repeat a lot of what he had said so infamously before.

CHARLIE ROSE: Turning to the Iraqi war. Are we seeing any -- the Maliki government being the least bit successful, any optimism there?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, we want to see it happen. We want to see it happen, because the only road to stability in Iraq is to see the major groups that are contesting for power to be able to learn to be able to live together and work together -- the Shia, the Kurd and the Sunni. You cannot have a state, a successful state that is driven by just one of those groups, or that puts the interests of one of those groups above those of the other two. And so, obviously, what we would like to see in Iraq is that kind of ecumenism, ecumenism of a sharing of power, and it has to do with sharing the wealth of the country and sharing decisions made about the country and sharing of political power.

CHARLIE ROSE: I know we'd like to see that.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: It's always been about.

CHARLIE ROSE: But do you see any degree of that taking place? I mean, they can't even pass the oil legislation, although there is some distribution of oil revenues as a budgetary matter.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes. Oh, I think there's an understanding in all three of the groups that this has to be the ultimate arrangement. And what we hope is that a reduction in the violence will produce an atmosphere where that kind of political progress is more possible than it is today.

I just saw coming into your studio here today this figure on one of the newscasts, that American deaths in Iraq in September were the lowest in many, many months. That's positive news, and we hope those deaths can -- we hope that the rate of attacks on Americans can fall down to zero, eventually. But it's an enormously dangerous enterprise for us. And obviously, we have got to do our very best to provide that physical security, so that these political decisions that you talk about can be made, and the correct political judgments can be made about the future of the country.

CHARLIE ROSE: I know those in the American government who believe it is becoming one of our most strategic relationships.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Without a question. Without a question.

CHARLIE ROSE: How do we see that? Why is that so important?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, we're in a group.

CHARLIE ROSE: Beyond the fact that it's a growing economy.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think well beyond that. We live in a globalized world, where many of the problems confronting us do not lend themselves to the actions of even the most powerful state, the United States. You need friends. You need allies. You need countries to help you build democracies overseas, to resolve conflicts like the one in Burma that we're witnessing so dramatically this week, to overcome global climate change and international drug and criminal cartels.

You can't do it even with the power of the United States alone. You have to have friends.

India is a global country. It's a democracy. It tends to see the world the way we do. It has an interest in stability in South and East Asia the way we do. And so I think that within a generation, if this relationship goes in the direction that we hope it will.

CHARLIE ROSE: And the nuclear deal is done.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And the nuclear deal is done. We hope that will happen. I think Americans might be able to say 20 years from now, India is one of our most two or three most important partners in the world. That will be a tremendous strategic change for us from the relationship we've had with India since 1947, 60 years now, and a great benefit to us, and I think it will be to the Indians as well.

CHARLIE ROSE: Is there anything going on -- I want to come to two things, but let me come to the conference. You have got two big conferences coming up. One is in Istanbul, which is the neighbors coming together.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes.

CHARLIE ROSE: And this is a real chance to talk to all the foreign ministers, I assume, and figure out what's possible. What do you hope to come out of that conference in Istanbul?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, the Turks are nice to host it. It's the right country to host it. We hope.

CHARLIE ROSE: Because it's a Muslim nation?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, it's a neighboring nation. It's a Muslim nation. It's stable and it's democratic.

CHARLIE ROSE: And it has a stake there because of the Kurds.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: It has got an enormous stake in the future of Iraq. And so, Turkey, if you will, is really the model for what many Muslim nations can become. So it's highly appropriate that Turkey would host this.

But we want to build up an international consensus that all of us have a stake in the future of Iraq, not just the United States, but Turkey does and the Europeans do and the Sunni Arab states do, and Iran and Syria do as well. And so, those are the countries that will be participating in this conference.

Now, we haven't seen, we have not seen the kind of actions from either Iran or Syria that would lead us to say that they are contributing to this.

CHARLIE ROSE: But do you see more in Syria or more in Iran?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I cannot say that we've seen evidence in either case that they're willing to shut down these channels where foreign terrorists come into Iraq, and they use their money and explosives to target our soldiers and Iraqi soldiers. And the Iranians and Syrians need to reflect very deeply on what the opportunity is, but also what the danger is to them.

CHARLIE ROSE: Are there any problems on the Syrian front at all?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I cannot say.

CHARLIE ROSE: General Petraeus seemed to indicate to me in a conversation he thought there was a little more opportunity there than there was with the Iranians.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, he's in a much better position than I am to measure that in a fine way, obviously, as our senior military commander. But from a Washington perspective, as we look out at both of these neighbors, Iraq -- neither of them are making the kind of supreme effort that one would hope they would make to produce stability in Iraq.

CHARLIE ROSE: Who is more interested in influencing events in Lebanon, the Iranians or the Syrians?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think they both are, but the Syrians perhaps have a more immediate interest, because of course they were driven out. They were humiliated. They had to leave after 29 years.

CHARLIE ROSE: After it was charged with the assassination of Hariri.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: After it was suspected that they had a hand in that, some people allege they had a hand in that. They were driven out in 2005. We don't want to see Syria come back as an occupying power, or even to have a

great deal of influence in Lebanon, because we want to see Lebanon become a democracy.

CHARLIE ROSE: The other conference is in November.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes.

CHARLIE ROSE: What do you hope to achieve there?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, we`re working very hard to convene a conference here in the United States, where the Israelis and Palestinians would be at center stage. Countries that support them from the region, from Europe, from Asia would be with them to support a Palestinian-Israeli negotiation that would lead towards eventually, eventually towards peace and the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

You know, next year, next May 14th is the 60th anniversary of the creation of Israel and the start of this entire conflict. And we have a real interest in seeing peace between Israel and the Palestinians. It`s not the perfect time to make peace, but we have to make the effort. And Secretary Rice is working very, very hard on this.

CHARLIE ROSE: Some will argue.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: . and trying to make progress.

CHARLIE ROSE: I know she is. But some will say she came late to that game, that you guys, all of you, haven`t done enough there and have not been as much of a factor and have not used and exercised American influence as much as you could have, because you`ve been preoccupied primarily with Iraq and Iran.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, first of all, I don`t think that`s true. But secondly.

CHARLIE ROSE: You don`t think that people believe that, or you don`t think the United States.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Oh, I think they may believe it, but it`s not true what they say. And secondly.

CHARLIE ROSE: I guarantee you people believe that.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: . frankly, as someone who -- who just works every day.

CHARLIE ROSE: I know, but.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: . trying to help our diplomacy succeed, we just can`t spend that much time debating this. We have got to spend more time trying to think how can we have a successful conference in November. How do you create movement at a time when Israelis want peace, but fear insecurity, and Palestinians of course are divided between Hamas and Fatah, in Gaza and the West Bank.

CHARLIE ROSE: Why didn't we support then what was done in Mecca? What was the problem there? I mean, remember, I had a conversation this week with Saud al-Faisal.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We -- I think there are elements of the Mecca agreement or the elements of the Arab peace plan for Palestine which we can use. And we're looking for the support of Saudi Arabia and Egypt and Jordan and all the other Arab states. But.

CHARLIE ROSE: What's wrong with that initiative?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: But the Mecca.

(CROSSTALK)

CHARLIE ROSE: . and Mecca -- and somehow trying to create some -- to heal the division.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I was talking about the Arab peace initiative, which is separate. Now, in Mecca, we've taken the position about Hamas. That if Hamas is not willing to recognize the state of Israel, if it says that terrorism is its way to achieve political power -- and it does -- and if it says it will not even recognize the body of work called the Middle East peace process going back to 1948, the efforts of every American administration since Harry Truman, if that's what Hamas is and what it believes, we're not going to deal with Hamas. And so we have never wanted to support Hamas.

CHARLIE ROSE: No matter how many elections they win.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Exactly. Exactly.

CHARLIE ROSE: No matter how many elections they win.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Exactly. Because you have an alternative in the Palestinian community. You have Fatah. You have an organization that wants to make its peace with Israel, that wants to live side by side with Israel. And so, obviously, that's the part of the Palestinian community that we're going to deal with.

Now, Hamas needs to make those changes in its own governing philosophy. And as long as it doesn't, it's not just the United States that is going to be resistant to any kind of relationship with Hamas. It's Europe. It's the major countries that have a relationship with Fatah.

And I think there's a great deal of frustration right now in the Arab world about Hamas and about its inability...

CHARLIE ROSE: Unwillingness to recognize.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Its inflexibility, yes.

CHARLIE ROSE: But do we support the Saudi initiative, the Abdullah initiative? The peace initiative?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We support what we're trying to do, which is to build momentum for negotiations. And we are, of course, can use elements of the Saudi initiative.

CHARLIE ROSE: Which part don't we like?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: What part don't we like?

CHARLIE ROSE: Yes.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I don't think we have enough time to go through what we like and don't like. I want to give you an answer of what we think is important. We need to see the buy-in from the Sunni Arab countries to this process. Now, that would come in several different parts. We need to see financial support for Abu Mazen, for Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian faction, trying to deal with -- Fatah -- deal with Israel.

CHARLIE ROSE: The elected president of.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We need to see financial support for the Palestinians....

CHARLIE ROSE: . Palestinian Authority, yes.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: . in the West Bank. We need to see political support for the Palestinians to walk down the road towards peace with Israel.

It's going to require a tremendous commitment of will by the entire Arab world to support the Palestinians in this process. And so, those are the two initiatives that we'd like see from the Arab world. And I think we're beginning to see it.

Now, not all of them have spoken definitively and not all of them have said they will attend the conference, but I think the signals are positive.

CHARLIE ROSE: Syria is coming to the conference or not?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, we don't know. We haven't issued invitations to everybody.

CHARLIE ROSE: What are we waiting for?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And we haven't -- well, we're building a consensus of what this conference should be about, and the countries that will be there will be countries that want to contribute positively towards peace between Israel and the Palestinians. So Secretary Rice has very deliberately not named all the countries who will be there or countries that will receive invitations, but we're certainly trying to build an environment that will be conducive for countries to attend that want to build peace between the two.

CHARLIE ROSE: Nick Burns, undersecretary of state for political affairs, thank you for coming.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: It's a pleasure, Charlie.

CHARLIE ROSE: Pleasure to see you again.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you.

CHARLIE ROSE: Hope we can do it again soon.

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