



Press Briefing in Damascus

Secretary Colin L. Powell

Damascus, Syria
May 3, 2003

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, good morning everyone, I am very pleased to be back in Damascus and I am looking forward to my conversations this morning with the President of Syria, President Bashar Asad, and with the Foreign Minister, my colleague Foreign Minister Shara.

Much has changed since my last visit to Syria. We have entirely a new situation in Iraq, and I think another element that is significant is the appointment of Mr. Abu Mazen as Prime Minister to the Palestinian authority and the presentation of the road map to both parties and to all other interested nations. So we have two dynamics at work: changed strategic situation in Iraq with the elimination of a dictatorial regime and a new opportunity for the people of Iraq to build a country and a government that rests on democratic foundations and the opportunity to move forward with a peace process between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

I will mention to the President in no uncertain terms that even though the Roadmap relates principally to the Palestinians and the Israelis, the United States sees this as part of a comprehensive settlement that must be achieved that would include the interests of Syria and Lebanon, as well. That is part of the President's vision.

So I look forward to a productive series of discussions here this morning. I also look forward to listening to the President as to his analysis of this changed situation, and I hope that we will both have candid exchanges of views and then take the time necessary to reflect both back in Washington and here in Damascus on the results of today's conversation in order to plot a way forward for the two parties to work more closely to help bring peace to this part of the world and to enhance relations not only between the United States and Syria, but with all the nations in the region.

I only have a few moments, so I only have time for one or two questions.

QUESTION: Secretary of State Powell, you have said previously that Syria is not on a list right now of countries that the US might consider at some point taking military action against. Is this something that you are willing to take off the table? Is this something if you hear the right things from the Syrian leaders that you would be willing to offer security guarantees?

SECRETARY POWELL: It is not on the table. I haven't heard either the President, Secretary Rumsfeld said the other day in one of his press conferences such a suggestion that there was a list with nations on it that we were getting ready to attack was a mischaracterization. We had serious concerns about some of the actions that were being taken by Syria during the course of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and we spoke out clearly and candidly to the Syrians about that. The President always has a full range of political, economic, diplomatic and military options to pursue foreign policy objectives, but I am here to pursue diplomacy and mutual political efforts that both sides can be taken. So, the issue of war or hostilities is not on the table.

QUESTION: So, sir, are you saying that (inaudible)?

SECRETARY POWELL: It has always been a United States goal that conditions could be created in this part of the world where no nation would have a need for any weapons of mass destruction. And, so that remains a long-standing United States goal. I think it is a goal that we have to pursue over time, and I am not supportive at the moment of a particular declaration that might be put forward for political purposes or to highlight the issue, but it remains an overall US objective that we would like to see the region free of weapons of mass destruction.

QUESTION: (in Arabic)

SECRETARY POWELL: I'll need a little help, excuse me (laughter).

Question: (as translated) Mr. Secretary, I would like to find out the comprehensive features for the solution that lies in the Roadmap that has been presented to the parties, and I would like to know what are the features of the proposed peace that is viewed within that Roadmap.

Secretary Powell: The President's vision and the vision of the Arab League are identical in this regard. We wish to see a Palestinian state come into being that will live side-by-side in peace with Israel, and we hope to do it in a relatively short period of time, as the President said, within three years or so.

But we have to get started, and the Roadmap is a way to get started. And the reason the Roadmap was delivered at this point was we believe that with the appointment of Mr. Abu Mazen as Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, along with a new government in Israel, we had leadership that we could work with, leadership that we hope now are firmly committed to peace. Both sides will have obligations that they will have to undertake and both sides have to reach out and begin dialogue with one another on security issues, on economic issues, on political issues, ultimately. It all has to begin, however, with the cessation of violence and the ending of acts of terror.

I am very pleased that Prime Minister Abu Mazen, in his first statement after being confirmed as Prime Minister by the PLC, spoke to this point and recognizes that violence and terror must end, and with that, then, I think all sorts of opportunities arise for both sides to march down the Roadmap together - both sides having obligations they must perform and both sides risks they must take in the cause of peace.

And so our goal remains the same, ultimately to bring into being a Palestinian state and at the same time work with Syria and Lebanon to make sure that those tracks do not appear to be neglected. They are not neglected, even though they are only touched on and not dealt with in detail in the Roadmap. They are never far from my mind, and in every one of my previous meetings with the President of Syria we have discussed the need for a parallel track that may or may not move at the same time, at the same rate as the Palestinian-Israeli track, but it must be there. We are interested in a comprehensive solution that will involve creation of a Palestinian state and settling the outstanding issues between Israel and Lebanon, and Israel and Syria.

I am afraid that I only had five minutes, and I must go. Thank you. One more? Okay.

QUESTION: Nicholas Kravev of the Washington Times. Mr. Secretary, yesterday you said that you will judge whether the Syrians have received and understood your message by their action and performance. What specific results will you be looking for?

SECRETARY POWELL: There are a number of areas that I'll be discussing with the President today. They are well known, dealing with respect to different organizations that are headquartered in Syria that have rejectionist agendas. There are other issues with respect to weapons of mass destruction development, sealing of borders with Iraq and a number of issues that are well known. And I am sure that I will have occasion to review all of those with the President, but overarching all of that it is important

for us today to have a discussion with the President that goes to those issues, but beyond that. Talks about the changed strategic context in which we are discussing these issues, and I think the two elements that I've mentioned, the situation in Iraq and the publication of the Roadmap give us more than enough to talk about and review the strategic context in which we then can talk about these kinds of specific issues. Thank you.

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