



## Interview with Al-Hayat

**Richard L. Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State**  
Washington, DC  
August 5, 2004

(12:55 p.m. EDT)

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, thank you very much for your time.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Thank you for having me.

**QUESTION:** Pleasure. The peace in Iraq, are we losing the peace in Iraq? And where do we stand today as far as the main challenges you are facing there?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** The main challenge is quite obvious: it's security. And moreover, it's generally the security situation in what we call the Baathist Triangle. The other parts of the city, we're having a temporary dislocation in Najaf. The other parts of the country are in much better shape, though we had some difficulty in Najaf, and it's suddenly mobile.

The good news is that in the main, it is Iraqis who are carrying the battle for their country against the insurgents.

**QUESTION:** What about foreign intervention, (inaudible) positions of Syria and Iran, (inaudible) militants and explosives?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** It's -- I think the accusations are more that Syria and Iran allow militants to cross the borders. It's a big long border, and we think the Syrians and the Iranians both should do more to stop this. But foreign elements fighting in Iraq are only one of the elements of the insurgency. I think the main element is former regime folks who are fighting.

**QUESTION:** Is there progress, as far as setting up an Iraqi military capable of handling these challenges?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Yeah, as I indicate, both in Najaf and in Mosul recently, it was Iraqis themselves who carried the major burden of the fighting. And I just saw yesterday on the ticker, the news ticker, that the first class of Iraqi army trained by Iraqis stood up. There were no Americans giving speeches, it was an Iraqi general saluting Iraqi troops and saying they were going to be the bricks in the wall which would defend the country.

**QUESTION:** Most of the southern part is besieged by American forces. Is there -- are there any plans for it?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Was --

**QUESTION:** Most of the southern (inaudible), there is (inaudible) were surrounded by Americans.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, we were passing, as I understand it, what sparked the recent conflict was American troops were driving by and were shot at by Mahdi army elements, and we returned fire. But as I say, not only U.S. units were fighting there, there are Iraqis who are fighting for the government, in order to take control of Najaf. But it wasn't us who violated the ceasefire, it was the Mahdi army.

**QUESTION:** You toured the region recently. What have you learned there from historic -- (inaudible).

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, I went right -- prior to the visit of Prime Minister Allawi to the region, I found a great deal of enthusiasm and hope among the regional countries that the Prime Minister and his government, the entire presidency, as we call it, can bring about a much more stable Iraq. And I was delighted to see the level of support in all the neighboring countries for the Allawi government.

**QUESTION:** The Saudi initiative to send Islamic and other troops, is that just a political cover or is there generally willingness on the part of some countries to send troops?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, I think it's a genuine gesture on the behalf of the Saudi Government. I think they're really seeking a peaceful resolution of the problems of Iraq, but I don't see much willingness on the part of many of the governments of the region, or farther beyond, to send troops.

But discussions still continue with those countries to see if they may be willing to.

**QUESTION:** Is this something the Iraqi government agreed to, sending Islamic and other troops, because it doesn't seem to be calling for that?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, the Iraqi government has said that they -- they're not dismissive of all Muslim troops serving Iraq, but they don't want troops from the neighbors. I think that's the difference.

**QUESTION:** There was talk at one point of Morocco and Tunisia sending troops.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** There was some discussion, I believe, between Mohamed VI; Morocco has decided that's not the best use of its forces. There was discussion of Pakistan, or Bangladesh, perhaps, being involved. But more recently, there's even been discussion of some of the states of the former Soviet Union perhaps being willing to send a small force to protect the United Nations personnel. These things are all in some stage

or another of conversation.

**QUESTION:** The elections were postponed in Afghanistan.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Is it possible to happen in Iraq as well?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Anything's possible, but I know the United Nations and the Iraqi Electoral Commission are dead set on having elections in January of '05. And I would note, just parenthetically, that the delay, their elections in Afghanistan, has had a very interesting effect. It has allowed almost 90 percent of the eligible voters to enlist in the voting rolls, which is a pretty phenomenal development, when you think of how far Afghanistan has had to come. After two decades of war and the horror of the Taliban rule, they really hunger for democracy.

**QUESTION:** So it's dependent on the security situation of Iraq?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, I think that's the -- certainly the long pole of the tent. To the extent the security situation is resolved more positively, it will be easier to get people out to vote.

We're working alongside the United Nations and the Iraqi government to bring this about by January of '05.

**QUESTION:** Mid-East director at the White House, National Security Council, is talking to the Palestinians and Israelis, I understand. Is there any plan to arrange for a security meeting between Israelis and Palestinians?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, I haven't seen the results of his discussions but I know that they're -- we've had a lot of discussions, both with the Palestinians and with the Israelis, such things as the Rafah crossing, trying to get a resolution of that; I think it's on its way to resolution.

I saw today, or yesterday, the news that the Israelis are going to be allowing Palestinian policemen to carry weapons now, so there are some slight, perhaps I'll call it "following."

**QUESTION:** You're not alarmed that the situation might collapse the Palestinian Authority?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Are you kidding? Of course I'm alarmed. Aren't you alarmed? Everybody's alarmed. But the Palestinian Authority clearly has to get their own house in order, and this is what I think was surrounding the recent spate of discussions about Abu Alaa's possible resignation, et cetera. It's all an attempt to get your house in order so they could be a meaningful partner for the Israelis.

**QUESTION:** To move to Sudan, the situation in Sudan. Any plans for military intervention there? Where are we in (inaudible)?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, the African Union, I think, is moving towards putting a force in there to protect the monitors with some EU money that's being -- the monies that provide the airlift.

The Government of Sudan has done some things in response to the UN Security Council resolution, particularly on the humanitarian side. But they get a failing grade when it comes to reining in the Jingaweit, and they've got to take -- step up to that challenge.

**QUESTION:** Well, with the -- go back to the Broader Middle East Initiative. Is that on the back burner now? Is anybody talking about it?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Yeah, I'm talking about it, and it's not on the back burner as far as I can see. In the region, it looks to me like things continue, some progress towards reform. The recent announcement from Saudi Arabia about municipal elections is a very interesting one. I had great discussions in Kuwait and in Jordan recently about their own programs of reform, transparency, education reform, et cetera. So it's very much on the front burner.

**QUESTION:** So you perceive the willingness from the leaders in the region that they are (inaudible)?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, it's not for me to seek a commitment. They know our views about this. We're willing to assist their efforts; we're not imposing our own efforts on the region. But in every country in the region, there is some degree of change going on, and it's coming from within, it's not coming from without. And we think that's a very positive thing, and to the extent a government wants it, we'll be glad to assist them.

**QUESTION:** With the recent terror alerts, and the heightened sense of security, there's also expectations of an attack on the United States before the elections. To what extent are you alarmed?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, we're quite alarmed. In the first instance, I must say we're delighted with the cooperation of Pakistan, which has allowed us, we think, to get a lot of information on a possible attack. I noticed our friends in Great Britain have just made some arrests, as we ourselves did in Albany, New York, (inaudible) some people who we believe were trying to purchase weapons to cause us harm.

But the amount of chatter that we've seen, and the amount of talk on jihadist websites leads us to believe that they're intent on trying to repeat the experience of Madrid; that is, to try to disrupt our political process and strike us in a way that both harms the political process and harms our nation, perhaps in the financial area.

**QUESTION:** At one point, there was a discussion of possibly postponing American elections if there was an attack on U.S. (inaudible).

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** There was no serious discussion. We can't be dissuaded, deterred, from following along with the political process.

**QUESTION:** There are divisions with Europe today, as far as the Iraq situation, as well as the Sudan situation -- the Iran, also, nuclear issue.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, each one is different, but I say on Iraq, I think the best indicator I can give you was the recent decision by NATO to send a delegation there to begin training in Iraq, and that's a pretty good sign that much -- not all, but much of the bad feelings of the past have

gone. On Iran, the EU 3 ministers, French, German and British, have led the charge, trying to assist the IAEA in getting the Iranians to be more transparent in the nuclear program. So I don't think there's a difference of opinion there between the EU and the United States.

On Sudan, we all recognize that this is a humanitarian crisis. We all need to do more, and you'll note that the vote was 13-0, and two abstentions, in the UN Security Council -- the abstentions being China and one other, I forget.

**QUESTION:** Russia.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Russia, right. And that seems to be a pretty good basis that indicates that most of the EU countries are with us.

**QUESTION:** The upcoming elections in Lebanon, Syria has always been (inaudible) decides who's president there. Are you going to let that happen here?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, this is something that's between the Government of Syria and the Government of Lebanon. First of all, we would be delighted to have a congenial, mutually beneficial relationship with Lebanon and Syria. But the Lebanese civil war has been over for well over a decade, and it seems to me, this is our strong view, that it's time for Lebanese forces to take charge of their entire country, and Syrian forces to remove themselves back to Syria. That's very much in keeping with the Taif Accords of October 1989.

Regarding the elections themselves, we don't pick candidates. These are matters for the people of Lebanon, following the 1926 constitution, to decide.

**QUESTION:** The U.S. imposed sanctions on Syria recently, and are you going to take any further actions if --

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Perhaps if we --

**QUESTION:** -- (inaudible) do not (inaudible)?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Perhaps -- but the sanctions, the Syrian Accountability Act, passed by the Congress and signed by the President, gives us the ability to work these sanctions in stages. And so we did, and that's stage one, and we're evaluating the response of the Syrian Government and we have the ability to go to stage two, which would be a more draconian sanction regime, but that decision hasn't been made.

**QUESTION:** Overall, are you satisfied with Syria progressing towards meeting some U.S. demands?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Syria? No, I think they've not made any fundamental decisions to be a much more positive player in the region. I don't think they've fully learned what's (inaudible) nation, that Baathist party, and so I think they still have some internal discussions and some internal thought processes to go through.

**QUESTION:** I appreciate this very much. Thank you.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Thank you. I appreciate you.

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