



## Interview on Al Arabiya Television with Nadia Bilbassy-Charter

**Richard L. Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State**  
Washington, DC  
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(11:00 a.m. EST)

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Mr. Secretary, thank you for this interview. Thank you for your time. And we're sorry to hear that you're leaving.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, thank you very much, Ms. Bilbassy.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Let's start --

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** We're not leaving so soon. We'll be around for a while.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Not so soon. Let's start by what happened in Jeddah in your consulate, and also the warning by the State Department that Americans have to leave. Does that mean that you anticipate more of terrorist attacks there?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, we all know that Saudi Arabia has had a difficult time in the recent couple of years, though their security forces have done excellent job in rooting out many of these terrorists. But it's the better part of wisdom to be very careful and to warn our citizens, particularly after this attack, that they need to be careful about their security.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** It has been, despite all this security that you have, they managed -- the attack has managed to kill five people, including two Americans, who were wounded. What does it say? I mean, what more can you do to stop such attacks?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, I think the first thing is that we -- because of some of the security upgrades we've had, they didn't do worse damage. And I want to publicly thank the Saudi security forces because they arrived very quickly and did an excellent job. And they suffered some injuries in this fight.

But what it says is this is a determined enemy. They care not for their own lives and they want to inflict maximum damage on others. And I think it's a warning for all of us, no matter where we live, not just for Saudi Arabia, that these people are out for blood and we have to watch it.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Despite all the recent arrests in the Kingdom, these attacks still happened. Does that mean that al-Qaida is getting stronger there?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Not necessarily. I think, as a matter of fact, I would say they are weaker. But they're still virulent, and I know our friends in Saudi Arabia know this and we know it. And we have to be ever vigilant. We can't let down our guard for one second.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** You've said in the past that relationship with Saudi Arabia is better in comparison to a year ago.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Yeah.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** What do you mean by that?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, I think it's better for a number of reasons. First of all, because of the trauma, I think, of terrorism in Saudi Arabia that we've really increased our cooperation in the counterterrorism sphere. And I would note that the 9/11 Commission made it very clear that Saudi Arabia was not involved in the terrible problem of 9/11. And I think this has helped dispel some of the urban myth that was developing around Saudi Arabia. And people now, I think, see that Saudi Arabia has been a victim of terrorism. And I think it's helped change the attitudes of many in the United States.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** A few more went to Iraq -- people like Lakhdar Brahimi, ex-envoy to the UN to Iraq, Adnan Pachachi and other 17 political parties. We've seen President Putin last night saying that under the current circumstances, with the violence that we've seen every day, it's impossible to hold the election.

Why is it so sacred to have the 30th of January as the date? And is it worth looking to these people?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Ms. Bilbassy, I would note that Mr. Pachachi, my friend, and others came under severe criticism in Iraq when they noted that maybe there should be a delay of the election. I think the fact of the matter is, as President Ghazi, Sheikh Ghazi Al-Yawar said while he was here in Washington, it is a moral and legal obligation of the Iraqi Government, the Interim Iraqi Government, to hold these elections, and we're going to hold them on the 30th of January and we're not going to be dissuaded by terrorists.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Again, a senior CIA analyst was quoted today is saying that unless the Sunnis participate in this election, it will defeat the object; i.e., it will feed indirectly the insurgents, and therefore, it's not going to help in the long run. I mean, can you see the importance of people in the so-called Sunni Triangle participating in this election?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** You know, I think it's more complicated than that in the so-called Sunni Triangle. I would note that in Baghdad, every opinion poll which was taken by Iraqis show that the Shia in the Baghdad area want to participate to a level of 90 percent and the Sunni to at least 70 percent. We would give anything in the United States to have that kind of participation.

We want to work hard -- the coalition -- to support the Interim Government of Iraq to be able to have the fullest possible election. We do want the Sunnis to be empowered to an appropriate level. We want them to participate. And my personal view is every day more and more people get a little more excited about the possibility of an election. The Sunnis don't want to do what happened in the 1920s, when the Shia then opted out of being part of the government and suffered for so many years.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** I understand the moral and ethical argument behind this commitment of holding it to the date, but, yet, practically speaking, I mean, we have seen in the last few days insurgents who are confident enough to be seen in Haifa Street, in the heart of Baghdad, basically trying to find out who are collaborating with the Americans. I mean, what does it say about, again, the security that you have to take into consideration to a great deal to hold this election to be fair and free?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, it says that the security is, the long pole in the tent, is very difficult in what's a difficult situation. There's nothing secret about that. But you ought to, I think, also concentrate on the huge number of Iraqis who are able and wanting to sign up to be police officers, the number of people who are working the electoral commissions, which have been set up throughout the country, and the number of people daily who are willing to risk their lives to have a free and fair and open Iraq.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** But these people are being killed in tens. I mean, every day there's an attack.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Every day people are killed, and every day people go to work, put on their police uniforms and other things and try to work for the betterment of Iraq. I'm only suggesting that you spend an equal amount of time saluting their courage, as you do talking about the terrible security situation, which I acknowledge.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Oh, absolutely. But talking about Fallujah, in particular, it was seen as a successful military operation, yet the attacks have increased. We have seen in the last few days more attacks, more people being killed, more car bombs, et cetera. So what did the Fallujah operation achieve?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Actually, the number of attacks, the total number have gone down since the end of Ramadan. And the number of car bombs, though there certainly are daily bombs, and many times car bombs, they are down from before. What we found in Fallujah, it was a -- almost a city of factories that made terrible weapons and people-borne explosive devices, et cetera.

So I'm not going to argue the fact that there aren't daily killings in Iraq. We can just look at your network or any other network and then see the proof. But if you want to talk the facts, at least temporarily, the amount of attacks are down from the pre-Ramadan time.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Do you expect people in Fallujah to participate in the election and so then they can go back to their homes?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Absolutely, absolutely. We're involved with the Iraqi Interim Government, that is the coalition, in reconstruction in Fallujah. I hope in the not-too-distant future -- I can't give you an exact date -- but not so many days in the future, the citizens of Fallujah will be allowed to return. We want them to return to a situation of having water and having some electricity so they can go about rebuilding their lives.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** In *The Washington Post* today, both King Abdullah of Jordan and the Iraqi President Ghazi al-Yawer, were quoted as saying that Iran was trying to influence the outcome of the election in Iraq by creating an Islamic state. They went to say that that will dramatically shift the geopolitical balance between Sunnis and Muslims to the degree that will have an Islamic state. Is the U.S. fearful of the emergence of an Islamic state that could have a federation with Iran?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** First of all, I don't see a great affection in the hearts of even religious Iraqis to duplicate the theocracy, which exists in Iran. We're not trying to prejudge an outcome in Iraq. We want a process that's free and fair and open to all Iraqis; one, obviously the majority, we'll have a majority rule, but we want a state that respects the rights of minorities. And that's the preferred outcome. We don't pick one side over another. But I have not so much fear that we're going to see a duplication of Iran.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** There must be a worry for you coming from neighboring countries like Jordan and the Iraqi President himself.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, I've been seven times to Iraq myself. I've seen the attempts of the Iranians to influence, particularly the south, with money and to try to buy certain clerics. I'm just expressing the view that there are many other clerics, and certainly a majority of the people in Iraq, whether they're Shia or Sunni, who do not want to have an Iranian-like state. They want an Iraqi state, one that's true to Iraqi values.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** In fact, they went to say that even one million Iranians have crossed the border trying to register and influence this election. So the worries are really great and they've given examples of what happened.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Oh, yeah. Let me give you -- don't just worry about that. I can't say if a million or 500,000 or 4 crossed the border. But they, presumably, could get false identity, et cetera. As you know, we're going to have out-of-country voting for Iraqis in 14 nations, including my own, where they will be allowed to vote in the election on January 30th. And we have about a million -- an absentee vote -- about a million-and-a-half Iraqis who are living in Iran.

And so, will they be allowed to vote freely and fairly? We certainly hope so. We trust so. We'll try to have observers there who can make this a reality, but there are a lot of difficulties. We can't gainsay that.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Talking about, still, King Abdullah and the President -- Iraqi President, they also talked about Syria's role in the insurgency. And again, they were given examples that it was underestimated before of how much directly the insurgency is directed from Syria, and money has been channeled to them. Are we likely to see -- I mean, I know you discussed that with the Syrians before, but are we likely to see more of U.S. pressure on Syria this time?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, certainly, Sheikh Ghazi and His Majesty King Abdullah did raise this issue. And certainly, we're coming to a better understanding that remnants of the Baath party, operating out of Syria, are certainly funding to a high degree some of the activities in Iraq. We will take these matters up with the Syrians. We have in the past. There have been some activities that the Syrians have undertaken which have been positive, but certainly not enough. And I would hope the Syrians would wake up and realize that they are going to have to live side by side with an Iraq, and that they had better change their behavior now so that that future relationship with the new Iraq will be one that's congenial.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Are we likely to see more of practical pressure on them, rather than just --

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, it's possible. These are things we will discuss with -- interagency first and we'll discuss with our friends in the neighborhood. And then we'll make a determination on how to move forward with Syria.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Syria, still. President Assad had offered the Israelis a new sort of channel of activism, as it's called. The Israelis rejected, the U.S. really hardly had any reaction. Why can't you seize on this track?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** I've seen some public statements and public comments in the media about this, but this has not been a subject of conversation that, to my knowledge, that we've had with the Syrians or that the Israelis have had with us. We're concentrating right now on trying to do what we can to bring about a better situation so on January 9th, Palestinians will be able to vote and perhaps begin a new future and a new relationship with Israel, which will ultimately end up with two states and a viable Palestinian state living side by side with Israel in peace and security.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Palestinian election, the President has talked recently with President Musharraf and King Abdullah, et cetera, that, really, he wants to make it a priority for him in this term to activate Israeli policy. But practically speaking, we have not seen, really, anything to indicate that -- no official envoy, no international conference, except some promise to help in the election. Why is that?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, I think you've been very unfair in that question. The reason I say that is, even today, while we're speaking here, the White House is announcing \$20 million of budget support for the Palestinian Authority. My colleague, Bill Burns, is taking part in the ad hoc committee meeting to assist the Palestinians. The President has twice spoken up in recent days publicly about his desire to use the political capital of our election to try to bring about a better situation.

Secretary Powell was dispatched to Jerusalem to talk to the Israelis and the Palestinians. So I think there is a time and there's more hope right now than before. But the Palestinian people themselves have to make a decision on their leadership, and I hope they will come up with a leadership, which will be able to lead them out of the wilderness and perhaps lead them to that viable Palestinian state. And in that case, there is no end to the things you might see.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Well, do you prefer Mr. Abbas as -- emerging as the prime minister?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** I prefer that the people of the occupied territories, the Palestinian themselves, pick whoever they think is the best to lead them to a better future. The past has not been good. The Intifadah II has been terrible with a terrible loss of life, both Palestinian and Israeli, and it has led to nothing. So let's change the equation.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Moving to the UN, your counterparts, the Europeans, praised Kofi Annan and didn't ask for his resignation. Would you join them in that? Do you think he should stay in his position?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, it's not for me to say whether he should stay or not. It's a decision that Kofi and his colleagues can make. But I've described Secretary General Kofi Annan as a valuable and valued interlocutor and we have respect for him.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** What would you say your legacy if you evaluate it in the past, and that of Secretary Powell? What did you achieve in the last four years?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Well, I think first of all, it's bad business to blow your own horn. We ought to let other people decide if we've achieved anything or not. But I think the fact of the matter is, from the very beginning of the Administration, with the difficult situation we had with China with the aircraft collision, to the situation where we have the best relationship with China we've ever had, is something to think about. India and Pakistan, who were on the verge of nuclear war no so long ago, that's in a much better situation than it was; the Moscow Treaty; the fact that we've had the Millennium Challenge Account. There's no end, I think, of things that we've been involved with. But you'll not find Secretary Powell and you'll not find Rich Armitage saying we did this or we did that. That's for others to say.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** And finally, the Administration in the new term, would we see more of a carrot or a stick in terms of the Middle East and how will you deal with it?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Oh, I think we'll probably see a continuation of both. I don't think there will be more of one or the other. I think that there's a -- we feel that there's a great deal of change generally in the Middle East. The situation of Iraq is an obvious one.

But, look, in Rabat on Saturday, we're going to have a Forum of the Future, where Middle Eastern leaders and the G-8 are talking about trying to take advantage of economic change to try to change the Middle East. And we know what the ticking time bomb in the Middle East is; it's unemployment. And so there's a lot going on in Saudi Arabia. People are registering now for municipal elections. There are new signs of civil society growing in Egypt. So there's a lot going on. I think the G-8, and certainly the United States, where appropriate, wants to be helpful to that process.

**MS. BILBASSY-CHARTER:** Mr. Secretary, thank you very much for this interview.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE:** Thank you so much. Thank you.

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