



Interview on Al Hurra Television With Michel Ghandour

Richard L. Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State

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MR. GHANDOUR: Sir, thank you for your time. You've been in Syria last week. During your visit to Damascus, you've delivered the Syrians a blunt and firm message, but your tone after your meetings with President Assad and Minister Shara was soft and not harsh as it was before you went to Syria. Why?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, one can be blunt and candid without being rude, and I think I certainly was that. We had a message to deliver to our Syrian friends. I think the message has been delivered and the message was received, it appeared to me, and now we'll watch to see if the Syrians follow through. There is no reason to publicly scream and shout. I happen to think the Syrians are considering their next move, and I hope they'll do the right thing.

MR. GHANDOUR: Were you satisfied from what you've heard from the Syrians?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I don't think it's a matter of satisfaction. We were able to make clear our own view on three different matters. The first was clearly the question of Iraq and Syrian -- the necessity for Syria's assistance in cutting down on the former regime elements who operate to and from Syria into Iraq; and the second, that we and the international community are looking for full respect to UN Security Council Resolution 1559, and, in particular, are looking forward to the spring parliamentary elections in Lebanon, making the point that these should be held free of all foreign interference; and lastly, of course, to seize the opportunity presented by the upcoming Palestinian elections and hopefully moving forward on the peace process.

MR. GHANDOUR: Is there any deadline for Syria to implement these concerns or to resolve these concerns?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I think the sooner the better. There is going to be an Iraq, after these elections on the 30th of January, and I think it's much better for Syria to have a more friendly, congenial relationship with that Iraq than the relationship they have at present. But I didn't say that X, Y or Z had to be done by a certain date.

MR. GHANDOUR: So the *New York Times* reported that the Bush Administration is considering imposing new sanctions on Syria. Do you expect that to happen after your last visit to Damascus?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I don't think the *New York Times* story to which you refer was very well-sourced and no one spoke with their own name. So I think I'm a little suspicious. We already have sanctions on Syria under the Syria Accountability Act. The President, at any time, has the ability to move forward with phase 2 of those sanctions. He has chosen not to do it yet. He's waiting to see the outcome of Syrian behavior over a length of time and then will make a decision on what to do. As far as I know, no decision has been made on other sanctions.

MR. GHANDOUR: We'd like to move to Iraq. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said that there is an American dilemma in Iraq and the U.S. is looking to the elections as a start to quit this dilemma and the DOD has sent a general to Iraq to review the situation there. What's your comment on that?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, my good friend, Foreign Minister Zebari, I didn't see his statement. But clearly, the elections mark a turning point for the Middle East and certainly for Iraq, that is, there will be an election held; it will be a democratic election. That does not mean the troubles in Iraq are over. Indeed, they'll be continuing the violence for some time to come. But it will mark a rather historic time, I think, in the Middle East.

Regarding the question of General Luck's upcoming visit to Iraq, he's going to look at, as I understand it, at the training of Iraqi forces, including police forces, and see if there are ways that we can do things better and more expeditiously to more rapidly stand up the forces of Iraq.

MR. GHANDOUR: The Iraqi Defense Minister has threatened today to transfer the war from Iraq to Tehran and Damascus. What's your comment on that?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I think the burden of those comments is that Iran and Syria both need to be more helpful to the situation in Iraq by making sure that they control their borders and they control money flows across their borders. And that's how I prefer to look at it, in that light.

MR. GHANDOUR: In Lebanon. Are you planning to send American observers to watch the Lebanese parliamentary elections?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I don't think we've thought that far ahead, but certainly, if there were international observers, Americans would like to be part of it.

MR. GHANDOUR: And there are informations confirming that there are discussions between Washington, London and Paris to hold a conference to follow up the implementation of the Resolution 1559. Can you confirm this?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, I can't confirm nor deny it. The 1559 resolution calls for periodic reports to the UN Security Council on the measures taken to assure that foreign interference is eliminated, that all foreign presence is eliminated in Lebanon. So I think we'll wait to see what the report to the Security Council is.

MR. GHANDOUR: I don't know if -- can I ask the last question?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: You can ask anything.

MR. GHANDOUR: Press reports are confirming that American commercial representative, Robert Zoellick, will be your successor. How do you feel about this?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I think that the Department of State and the nation are going to be very pleased to have such a formidable foreign policy expert as Mr. Zoellick supporting Dr. Rice and supporting the President in this Department.

MR. GHANDOUR: And what are you planning to do after you leave?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Oh, I think I'll take about a month off and then I'll restart my business and I'll be in northern Virginia, which was a consulting business of international variety. But I'll be heard from from time to time on various issues of interest, including issues of the Middle East.

MR. GHANDOUR: Thank you so much.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Thank you.

MR. GHANDOUR: Thanks.
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