



Remarks With Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed About Gheit After Meeting

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Benjamin Franklin Room
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(5:28 p.m. EST)

SECRETARY RICE: I'd like to welcome Foreign Minister Gheit. We had a frank and broad-ranging discussion. The United States deeply appreciates Egypt's work on behalf of Middle East peace, in particular the recent summit between President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Sharon at Sharm el-Sheikh. We thank you very much for hosting that. President Mubarak's commitment to the Middle East peace process is well known to us. We discussed the important work ahead of us in order to realize this moment of opportunity.

We also appreciate Egypt's continuing efforts in the rebuilding of Iraq and in supporting the peace process in Sudan. We had an extended discussion of the need for action by the Sudanese Government to deal with the difficult situation in Darfur.

These steps show clearly Egypt's leadership in the Arab world. At the same time, the Foreign Minister and I discussed issues of reform and liberalization in the Arab world, and I noted to him the President's remarks in his State of the Union Address that the Egyptian Government has the opportunity and the responsibility to be as great a leader for reform in the region as it has been a leader for peace.



I look forward to many further discussions with the Foreign Minister.

Mr. Minister.

FOREIGN MINISTER GHEIT: Thank you very much. Yes, as the Secretary have stated, we have had discussions, consultations on a range of subjects. The Palestinian-Israeli settlement, the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings, the way forward, the roadmap, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the settlements in the northern part of the West Bank. We touched on the situation in Lebanon, the Iraq situation, as well as Sudan. And we covered other issues related to the coming meeting in Cairo, the G-8 Foreign Ministers meeting with Arab Foreign Ministers on the 3rd. And I think it was a fruitful discussion, and the start of a relationship for two new ministers of -- Secretary and Minister. It is a very long and friendly relationship, that we would continue that, of course, and we will continue consolidating that relationship. Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, with the -- in reference to the problems with Syria over what happened to Mr. Hariri, you're recalling the U.S. Ambassador. Do you plan any action, so far as having the Syrian Ambassador here pack up and go home or anything along those lines?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we've taken the steps that we think necessary at this point. Let me be very clear that this is not the first time that we have discussed with the Syrian Government our differences. Unfortunately, there happens to be a growing list of differences with the Syrian Government. We have made clear our concerns about terrorism and support for terrorism. We have made clear our concerns about Syrian territory and what appears to be happening with the Iraqi insurgency.



The Syrian Government is, unfortunately, on a path right now that -- where relations are not improving but are worsening, and what we have said to the Syrian Government in light of the recent events, the recent very tragic events in Lebanon -- and let me just say that the United States Government was deeply grieved by what happened to Mr. Hariri and condolences to his family and to the Lebanese people for that event.

But this most recent event, we have said to the Syrians, as have others -- and I believe there's just been a recent Presidential Statement out of the UN -- that there should be a full investigation of this matter.

But our problems with the Syrian Government are not new. We would hope that the Syrian Government would take the opportunity of this signal from the United States to review where we are in the relationship and to try to put our relations on a better path.

QUESTION: Dr. Rice, the Egyptian Foreign Minister was talking this morning about the need to have in mind and consideration at least the end game in mind and to have a timetable when talking about the Palestinian-Israeli track --

QUESTION: Timeframe.

QUESTION: Timeframe. How far do you see, how far do you agree with that? Do you see these points working at this time?

SECRETARY RICE: We have, at this point, a very reliable guide to how to get to the President's -- President Bush's vision of a two-state solution, Israel and Palestine living in peace, and it's called the roadmap. And the Foreign Minister and I talked about how to use the new opportunity that we have before us, an opportunity afforded by new Palestinian leadership, afforded by the Israeli disengagement plan, to achieve continued progress, to achieve continued momentum toward getting back on the roadmap. The roadmap is the way to a political horizon that we all seek.

And so what we must do now is do our work well in this period of time. The Minister and I talked about the important work that we will do with the Palestinians, in terms of the training and equipping their security forces. We talked about the need for economic development and economic reform in the Palestinian territories. Obviously, the Israelis have responsibilities to create conditions in which the new Palestinian leadership can build democratic institutions for peace, and the Palestinians have very strong obligations to fight terrorism and to deal with the terrorist threat so that Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace.

We have a lot ahead of us, and we talked about the March 1 conference in London, which will be another opportunity for the international community to signal its support to the parties for the hard work that they have to do.

FOREIGN MINISTER GHEIT: And if I may -- if I may comment on the London meeting, the London meeting, as perceived, is a good meeting. I hope it will produce good results and it would help the Palestinian administration to sort of be helped to achieve what is desired out of the Palestinians. So it is a meeting that we all look forward for its success.

SECRETARY RICE: Let us do the work before us, and the roadmap has a very significant set of steps that need to be taken. We need to get back onto the roadmap and let's concentrate on the work before us.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, by withdrawing our Ambassador to Syria, are you suggesting that Syria may bear some responsibility for the assassination? And secondly, just regarding your meeting, did the status, the imprisonment of Imam Noor come up in your discussions and can you tell us about that?

SECRETARY RICE: Yes, on the first matter, the withdrawal of the Ambassador, as I said, relates to, unfortunately, the fact that the relationship has been, for some time, not moving in a positive direction, but this event in Lebanon, of course, is the proximate and -- proximate cause of the withdrawal. We are not laying blame. It needs to be investigated; that's the important point. However, as Resolution 1549 notes, Syria is in interference in the affairs of Lebanon. There are Syrian forces in Lebanon. Syria operates out of Lebanon. And so when something happens in Lebanon, Syria needs to help to find accountability for what has happened there.

This is a part of the destabilization that takes place when you have the kind of conditions that you do now in Lebanon, thanks to Syrian interference.

So we are united with the rest of the world in wanting a full investigation into what happened here, but there is no doubt that the conditions created by Syria's presence there have created a destabilized situation in Lebanon. That's very clear to everyone, and we would like to see Syria understand its obligations to adhere to the requirements set by Resolution 1549.

Oh, on -- yes, right. Yes, I did raise our concerns, our very strong concerns about this case. I did talk at some length about the importance of this issue to the United States, to the American Administration, to the American Congress, to the American people. And I expressed our very strong hope that there will be a resolution of this very soon.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) so far, regarding the Syrian situation. And I have another question. Did you offer the Lebanese any technical help regarding the investigation?

SECRETARY RICE: On the second point, of course, we are always willing to help technically where we are needed. But we did discuss the situation in Lebanon. We discussed the need for calm. We discussed the need for Lebanon to be able to manage its affairs. But I just wanted -- I was very clear with the Foreign Minister that the Syrian problem, as Resolution 1549 notes, is a serious problem, and the Syrians need to address that.

I also have related to the Minister, as I have from all ministers from the region when I have the opportunity to meet with them, our very strong desire that Syria find a way to a new path with the United States, and that that really should begin with Syrian understanding and accountability for what is going on in Baghdad as a result of people who are headquartered or acting out of Damascus. If needed. If needed.

QUESTION: Secretary Rice, how seriously is the United States considering imposing additional sanctions on Syria if it fails to take the steps you want?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, as I've said, the Syrian -- U.S.-Syrian relationship is not moving in a positive direction. And it would be our hope that the Syrian Government would take the multiple meetings that it's had with American officials, in which we've talked about our concerns, the fact that we did, under the Syria Accountability Act, levy a number of sanctions; the fact that we have had to cooperate with others, including the French, on Resolution 1549; the fact that we've had concerns about what the Syrians -- the Syrians' apparent unwillingness to deal with the insurgency problem in Iraq out of Syria; that the Syrians would take this as a very strong signal that the United States does not like the direction of U.S.-Syrian relations, and we will continue to consider what other options are at our disposal.

QUESTION: Are you going to Cairo?

SECRETARY RICE: Our delegation has not yet been decided, but I'll get back to you, how's that? Okay, thank you.

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