



Interview With Jonathan Karl of ABC News

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
London, United Kingdom
March 1, 2005

MR. KARL: Madame Secretary, thank you for taking time for this interview.

SECRETARY RICE: It's a pleasure to be with you.

MR. KARL: It's been an incredible few days in Lebanon. They've had thousands of people in the streets, the resignation of the government, the suggestion Syria may withdraw. Are we seeing the beginning of a democratic revolution in Lebanon?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, if we just step back a little bit, it's been an incredible couple of months in the Middle East with the Iraqi elections, Palestinian elections, and now events in Lebanon. And it certainly should be the beginning of a true democracy in Lebanon because the Syrians should live up to the obligations under 1559 to withdraw their military forces, their security forces, and allow the Lebanese people to have a process that is not contaminated by foreign influence.

MR. KARL: President Assad just gave an interview where he said he would love to withdraw from Lebanon and it's very costly to Syria. He's worried about security, though. He wants peace with Israel first. What about an interim step? Would the U.S. tolerate Syria withdrawing, say, to the Bekaa Valley?

SECRETARY RICE: The call in 1559 is for a Syria withdrawal. We also need to focus on the elections and giving the Lebanese people an opportunity to have free and fair elections in which there is not a presence -- a dominating foreign presence -- which clearly would have a way of changing the nature of those elections. And I do not think that President Assad is in any position to start setting conditions for meeting the requirements of 1559.

MR. KARL: Is there any evidence that the U.S. or anybody else has that Syria was involved in any way in the assassination of Hariri?

SECRETARY RICE: We do not know the facts surrounding the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri. That is why there needs to be an investigation, an international investigation in which people can have confidence. It is why we've called upon the Lebanese Government to completely cooperate with that investigation. And we will see. But there is no doubt that in setting certain conditions in Lebanon, the Syrian presence there has contributed to a destabilized environment in which that type of thing can happen.

MR. KARL: Well, Syria says they're worried about civil war, Assad says, if the Syrian troops withdraw. Would you consider an international peacekeeping force to move in once the Syrians have moved out?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it's important not to get ahead of ourselves. Resolution 1559 calls on the Syrians to withdraw. They should do that. We should have free and fair elections; and I'm quite certain that if the Lebanese people wish to have it, they can have international assistance with those elections so that those elections can meet international standards.

A lot has happened in Lebanon in the last two or three days; and what the Lebanese people should know is that the international community stands with them in their desire and aspirations for free and fair elections that can lead to Lebanon being governed by the Lebanese.

MR. KARL: Now, you have also raised repeatedly the issue of Syrian support for terrorism. The Israelis are concerned about that. Would the United States tolerate an Israeli attack on Syria, a unilateral attack?

SECRETARY RICE: What we need is for Syria to take its obligations not to support it. We're starting to see a picture of a Syria that really is a block -- a blockage to a different kind of Middle East. When you think about it, you have the territory of Syria being used to support an insurgency in Iraq, for Iraq, that is clearly standing in the way of a better life for the Iraqi people who voted overwhelmingly for that better life. When you think about what Syria is doing in Lebanon, you have Lebanese in the streets telling the Syrians to go home so that Lebanon can control its own future.

And in the Palestinian territories where today, here in London, we have had a major conference to generate support for the Palestinian Authority, you have Syria continuing to support Palestinian rejectionist groups. There is evidence that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad headquartered in Syria was, in fact, involved with the planning of those attacks in Tel Aviv.

And so the Syrians have a lot to answer for. We don't know the degree of Syrian involvement; but certainly, what is happening on the territory of Syria, in and around Damascus, is clearly threatening to the different kind of Middle East that we're trying to build.

MR. KARL: So what is the evidence?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, there is firm evidence that Palestinian Islamic Jihad, sitting in Damascus, not only knew about these attacks but was involved in the planning. And we will be prepared to talk with others, with the Israelis, with the Palestinians, with others in the region about this. Again, no one knows the extent of Syria's involvement; but when you have this sort of thing happening on the territory of Syria, Syria needs to be more accountable and more active in fighting Palestinian rejectionists if, indeed, they want to support the peace process, as they say they do.

MR. KARL: So back to my question then. Would the U.S. tolerate a unilateral Israeli strike on Syria?

SECRETARY RICE: I don't think that's a question that we should even consider. At this point, there is a lot of pressure on Syria to live up to its obligations under 1559 concerning Lebanon, to be active in confronting the Iraqi insurgents who are operating out of Syria and to be active in closing down the activities of Palestinian rejectionist groups that are operating in Syria.

MR. KARL: So would you caution the Israelis not to do such a thing?

SECRETARY RICE: I'm not going to get into this. The Israelis have made their concerns known about what the Syrians are doing. We have made our concerns known about what the Syrians are doing. Indeed, the international community needs to be concerned about what the Syrians are doing. The Syrians know what they need to do.

MR. KARL: President Assad said that he contacted the State Department, he contacted the Pentagon, he asked for assistance in controlling the Iraqi-Syrian border, and he says he has still not had a response. That was back in October. He wanted some night-vision goggles. He wanted to work with the United States on controlling the border. That's what he says. Is that right?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, President Assad has the capability to deal with insurgents who are using Syrian territory to plot and plan and perhaps even support more actively insurgents operating in Iraq. Syria is a very controlled state; and I'm quite certain that if the Syrians wish to get more serious about dealing with the insurgents that there is plenty of opportunity for them to talk with those who are responsible and, for us perhaps more importantly, with Iraqi authorities who are trying to control that border. Prime Minister Allawi went to Syria to talk to them about it. I'm quite certain if the Syrians really want to be active in dealing with the insurgency that people will be prepared to talk about it.

MR. KARL: You mentioned the rumblings of democracy that we're hearing and seeing throughout the Middle East. Has Iraq been the catalyst that some thought it would be, some argued it would be before the war? Is it really -- has Iraq helped to kind of create this ripple effect?

SECRETARY RICE: I can't help but think of the image of 8-plus million Iraqis in the heart of the Arab world going to exercise their democratic franchise, Iraqis voting in Iraq for a free election, for an Interim Iraqi Government; for that matter, Afghans voting in Iraq, and Iraqis voting in Syria for an Iraqi government. I do think it's having an effect, because people are looking and they're saying, "Why not us? Why should it be the case that Iraqis have the chance to exercise their voice, a voice that contributes to a feeling of human dignity, of pride in one's individual rights? Why shouldn't that be the franchise of the people of the Middle East?" Yes, I think it's having an effect.

MR. KARL: Don't you have to be careful what you wish for though in countries like Saudi Arabia and even Egypt? If you had full democratic elections tomorrow, you could end up with governments that are more radically Islamic and more anti-American than you have now.

SECRETARY RICE: Jonathan, I have always heard dire predictions about what would happen if you let people choose their future; and it's very rare that those dire predictions actually come to fruition. Very often it's said, well, these people are not ready because they're extremists, or these people are not ready because they can't govern themselves.

And if we've learned anything, it's that the practice of democracy, in fact, has a sobering effect on people. If you look at the Iraqis, where Saddam Hussein exploited differences between Shia and Sunnis and Kurds and others for decades, and what are you seeing from the Shia who were oppressed horribly over decades? You're seeing a reaching out to Sunnis and Kurds as a part of the democratic process.

I think democracy has a very sobering effect on people and it has an effect of bringing people together around their differences. That doesn't mean that there aren't difficult times ahead for all of these fledgling attempts at democracy. But it does mean that having some faith in values that have worked to bring human dignity and pride to so many parts of the world is something that America also should be willing to stand for.

MR. KARL: To quickly change subjects. You've seen some of the buzz about you running for President in 2008 and there's even a website, there's even a Condoleezza Rice for President song, a theme song.

(Laughter.)

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, really?

MR. KARL: Yes. Would you consider it?

SECRETARY RICE: No. I'm really respectful of those who do run for office. I know what I do well and I know what I like to do and I'm really going to try to concentrate on being a good Secretary of State.

MR. KARL: So you would categorically rule out running for President in 2008?

SECRETARY RICE: Jonathan, I'm going to try to be a good Secretary of State, and then, as I've said many, many times, there's always NFL Commissioner.

MR. KARL: Right. So it sounds like there's a door open now.

SECRETARY RICE: Jonathan, I'm going to try to be a good Secretary of State and see if I can do this job well, and then we'll see if the NFL is open.

MR. KARL: The NFL and maybe something else. We'll see.

Thank you very much, Secretary Rice.

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