



Interview With Jim Lehrer of The NewsHour

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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MR. LEHRER: Madame Secretary, welcome.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you. It's nice to be with you.

MR. LEHRER: Are you satisfied with Syria's reaction to calls for them to withdraw their troops from Lebanon?

SECRETARY RICE: The Syrians have not yet withdrawn their troops from Lebanon, and the international community will not be satisfied until Syria has done that. There is a United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559, sponsored by the United States and by France. There are now calls from important Arab countries like Saudi Arabia for Syria to withdraw. The Lebanese people, perhaps most importantly, have said that the Syrians should withdraw because the Lebanese people are demonstrating that they want to be able to carry out their political aspirations without foreign interference, and Syria should heed that call.

MR. LEHRER: President Assad, as I'm sure you know, has announced that he's going to address his parliament tomorrow and the expectation is that he's going to make an announcement that there is going to be a partial withdrawal and a redeployment of the rest of the Syrian troops near the Syrian border. Is that good enough?

SECRETARY RICE: Resolution 1559 says withdraw your troops. It is also the case, Jim, that they need to withdraw their security personnel because Syrian security personnel, their intelligence services, cast a long shadow over Lebanon, and it is going to be very difficult for the Lebanese people to exercise their franchise freely in the upcoming elections with Syrian personnel still there.

And so the Syrians need to withdraw their troops, they need to withdraw their security personnel, and they simply need to realize that they don't have any support in the international system any longer to maintain their presence there.

MR. LEHRER: What do these security personnel do? You're talking about intelligence officers, right? What do they do?

SECRETARY RICE: Obviously, there are people there who are there, shall we say, not transparently, who are -- who interfere in Lebanese affairs, who probably cast a kind of chill over Lebanese affairs. We've seen this before when countries interfere in the affairs of others and do it surreptitiously, it's not a good thing, and the Syrians should withdraw that personnel as well.

MR. LEHRER: Madame Secretary, would any of this be happening if former Prime Minister Hariri had not been assassinated?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it's difficult to say, but certainly the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri, the brutal assassination of this man, who stood for tolerance, who was a leader of the opposition, who was clearly willing to challenge Syrian power in Lebanon, was a spark that I believe really lit the desires of the Lebanese people, which had been there. They've been underneath. Perhaps there was some fear of expressing them, but now people are expressing them. And so, clearly, this had an effect.

MR. LEHRER: Many people believe that Syria was behind the Hariri assassination. What is your view of that now?

SECRETARY RICE: We don't know whether the Syrians were somehow directly responsible for the Hariri assassination and we've never made such a charge. But the conditions that Syria has created in Lebanon with their presence there, with their efforts to destabilize, with their efforts to control the course of Lebanese affairs on a daily, hourly basis, has certainly created the circumstances in which the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri took place; and therefore, Syria needs to change its behavior, it needs to recognize that the time is up, that people are no longer willing to tolerate Syrian influence and Syrian forces there.

MR. LEHRER: The Syrian Ambassador to the United States was on our program a couple of nights ago, and he said that it's a terrible mistake for the United States to view Syria as an enemy. Is he right?

SECRETARY RICE: The United States views Syria as a problem in the Middle East, but the United States isn't the issue here. The Syrians have tried to make this an issue between the United States and Syria. It is clearly not.

When the Syrians used their territory or allow their territory to be used for Palestinian Islamic Jihad to plot and plan a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, that is clearly aimed right at the peace process and aimed at the aspirations therefore of the Palestinian people, the Syrians are in the way of Palestinian aspirations.

When the Syrians allow their territory to be used by insurgents, former regime elements of the old Saddam Hussein regime, to attack Iraqis who are trying to have a better future in Iraq, the Syrians are frustrating the aspirations of the Iraqi people.

When the Syrians have their forces and their security personnel in Lebanon and create conditions in which a respected former prime minister is assassinated, they are frustrating the aspirations of the Lebanese people who are in the streets in Beirut to say the Syrians must go home.

So the Syrians should not try and change the subject, that this is somehow between the United States and Syria. This is evidence, clear evidence, that Syria is now out of step with the region. It is a problem not just for the region, but for these people in Lebanon, in Iraq, in the Palestinian territories who are trying to find their way to a better future.

MR. LEHRER: Everything that you just said about Syria, have you communicated that directly to the Syrian Government?

SECRETARY RICE: We have communicated to the Syrian Government for so long, so many times, that they needed, for instance, to stop interfering in the affairs of the Iraqis, that, as the Iraqis themselves have said, that they needed to stop supporting from their territory former regime elements of the -- the worst elements of the old Baathist Party, who are trying to reestablish Saddam Hussein's tyranny in Iraq.

The Syrians have been told and told and told. I would remind people that not too long before he left, Deputy Secretary Armitage was there with a direct message to the Syrians. Prior to that, Secretary Powell had been there with a direct message to the Syrians. And every time, the Syrians did essentially nothing. They did as little as they could do, not as much as they could do.

But the Syrians now need to recognize that this is not a problem of the United States. It's obviously a problem with the Saudis. It's a problem with the French. It's a problem with the UN Security Council. It's time for the Syrians to change their behavior.

MR. LEHRER: Do you see any sign that they're going to?

SECRETARY RICE: We will see. I would hope that they recognize fully their isolation at this point. The United States and others have made common cause with now the Lebanese people because this really is, Jim, about the Lebanese people. We are seeing in the Middle East that people are losing their fear of expressing themselves, of expressing their desire for the same freedoms or the same human dignity that we all enjoy, those of us who happen to have been lucky enough to be born on the right side of freedom's divide, and we're seeing the people losing their fear of expressing themselves.

The Lebanese people are now in the streets. The Iraqi people went to the polls and voted, despite the threats and intimidation of terrorists. The Palestinian people voted for a man who says that it's time to end the armed Intifadah and make peace with Israel so that two states -- Palestine and Israel -- can live side by side in peace.

The Middle East is changing. And those states that don't recognize that the Middle East is changing, and indeed try to halt that change -- states like Syria or Iran -- need now to be, by the international community, isolated and condemned for that.

MR. LEHRER: David Ignatius, columnist for *The Washington Post*, quoted a Lebanese leader the other day in his column as saying that what is going on in the Middle East that you just describe is comparable to the falling of the Berlin Wall. Do you see it as dramatically important as that?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I was around for the fall of the Berlin Wall. I was here in Washington, the National Security Council staff. And it certainly has a feel of people gaining a sense of their own power to change things, a sense of their own ability to chart a different course despite what just months ago had seem to be a fairly implacable status quo.

But it's also important to recognize that there is hard work ahead, that this will not necessarily unfold easily. There are regimes that will try and frustrate these opportunities that are there for the people of the Middle East. They have a hard road ahead because democracy, while it is desirable, is never easy.

And what the international community needs to do -- and I have a sense is doing -- is to come alongside these people now who are feeling their sense of power to change events and to say to them, "We stand with you in the changes that you're trying to make."

There was so much talk before about whether, when the President talked about the spread of freedom and liberty, this was somehow going to be America imposing its will, imposing democracy. You don't have to impose democracy, you impose tyranny. And you're seeing people responding not just to the President's words -- although when the American President says things, it matters -- but responding to what they see as changed circumstances in which they may be able to chart a different kind of future. And as hard as it's going to be, the international community now needs to be completely united behind them.

MR. LEHRER: I'm sure you've noticed, too, that people have said it's very important that, at a time like this, that the United States not get into a "gloating" mode and not to be too far out in front of the people on the ground. Do you agree with that?

SECRETARY RICE: I agree completely that this is -- the locus of this is the indigenous sense of empowerment that we are seeing in so many places in the Middle East. We will need to -- the United States will need to continue to speak out for the regimes in the area, for the governments in the area, to be responsive to this new sense of empowerment of people. The United States, along with our European and other democratic allies, will need to provide mechanisms and forums for people to express themselves.

For instance, the Broader Middle East and North African Initiative has a Forum for the Future which met recently in Rabat. The idea behind the Forum for the Future is that civil society groups from the Middle East can be in contact and meet with civil society groups and women's groups and business groups from the democracies. We can sponsor those kinds of programs. We can help with resources for democracy training and all of that.

But this is not America's revolution. This is not America's sense of empowerment. In order for this to work, it has to be the sense of empowerment and change from the people of the region. And that is what we are starting to sense now, and of course there is no need for triumphalism because -- or no desire for it, because if there's a triumph here it's not America's triumph; it's the triumph of the human spirit, it's the triumph of human will to live in freedom.

MR. LEHRER: You mentioned Iran. Where do things stand today as to whether or not the United States is going to join the Europeans in negotiating with Iran about their nuclear program?

SECRETARY RICE: The President, when he was in Europe, and then my follow-on trips, we've had very good discussions with the European-3 and indeed others about how to deal with the problem of an Iran that is not transparent about what it is doing with its nuclear programs. The President listened very carefully and now is examining with his foreign policy advisors how we might be able to support the European-3 in their diplomacy.

This is not a matter, Jim, of the United States giving concessions to Iran. This is a matter of recognizing that the European-3 diplomacy needs to work, that the Iranians need to accept the path that is being presented to them by the Europeans and that we should try and support -- we've said all along that we support the diplomacy. We're looking now at how we might be able more actively to support that cause.

MR. LEHRER: But no decision has been made?

SECRETARY RICE: No, no decision has been made and we're continuing to talk to our European friends. I talked to a couple of the foreign ministers just an hour or so ago and we're going to continue to do this because what we're trying to do is to forge a common direction in the policy toward Iran so that everybody understands clearly that there is unity of purpose and message that Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon, that Iran can -- must use every opportunity to be unambiguous about its activities, that it needs to give confidence to the international system that it is not trying to get a nuclear weapon under cover of civilian of nuclear power. And so far, Iran has not passed that test.

MR. LEHRER: And the Europeans want the United States to participate in offering incentives of some kind to Iran; in other words, if you will do all these things you just outlined, we -- the United States and Europe -- will do the following things?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I would think of it more that the Europeans are trying to give the Iranians reason --

MR. LEHRER: Economic things?

SECRETARY RICE: There are a number of things that the Europeans are considering. But they're trying to give them reason to do what the Iranians really ought to do, which is to show the world that they're prepared to live up to their international obligations.

Now, what we're considering is: How can we support that? Are there ways that we need to be responsive so that the Europeans can demonstrate a different path to the Iranians?

But we need to keep the focus not on what Europe needs to give, not on what the United States needs to do with the Europeans, but on what the Iranians need to do. Again, there's a tendency with these countries to try to change the subject. What can Iran get? What should Iran get? Well, the international community is saying pretty clearly to the Iranians, "You need to show the world that you're serious about a message to the world that you don't intend to try and build a nuclear weapon." And so far, the Iranians just haven't been able to do that.

MR. LEHRER: Both President Bush and Vice President Cheney have said in varying forms of words that Israel might want to take military action against Iran if it, in fact, does have a nuclear weapon or develops a nuclear weapon or is trying to develop a nuclear weapon, and that they essentially said that should be expected. How should that be read?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it should be read as a statement of how destabilizing it could be for Iran to have a nuclear weapon, and nothing more than that. And everybody understands fully that it would be destabilizing for Iran to have a nuclear weapon.

And by the way, the nuclear program gets a lot of attention and, of course, it is an immediate concern. But I sensed in Europe concern about other aspects of Iranian behavior as well when, at a time when we were at a conference called "Supporting the Palestinian Authority" in London, a very fine conference that Prime Minister Blair organized so that we can take advantage of this moment for, perhaps, real progress in the Israeli-Palestinian issue, to have the Iranians continue to support terrorist rejectionist groups is something that the international community has to be worried about.

When you think about an Iran that, according to the Iraqis, is interfering in Iraq's affairs, that is something -- the Iranians should not interfere in the affairs of their neighbors.

And finally, when you look at where the Middle East is going, when you look at all these signs that people want to be empowered toward freedom, the Iranians are going in the opposite direction with a population that has clearly demonstrated that it wants a democratic future. You have an unelected few of mullahs who hold the future and the fate of their people in their hands and in the most limited numbers possible.

MR. LEHRER: But it's fair to say, based on what particularly the President has said more recently, that no matter what happens with the Europeans, no matter what the incentive situation turns out to be, and if it works or doesn't work, the military option remains on the table; correct?

SECRETARY RICE: The President always keeps all options on the table. But he also emphasized that this is a time to think about the diplomacy, that we have a number of options available to us that are diplomatic options. We've made a lot of progress, Jim, over the last year or so in seeing an international community that's coming together around several very important principles.

You know that we do not believe that there's any reason that the Iranians need to go to nuclear power, given their significant energy reserves. But for instance, when they recently did sign a cooperation agreement with the Russians, it included a number of -- or so the Russians say, we haven't gotten the details. But it apparently included a number of anti-proliferation measures like the Russians' insistence that there would be an additional protocol with verification measures, that there would be a fuel take-back so that if Russia is providing the fuel, the Iranians can not keep the fuel, which somewhat diminishes proliferation risk. You see the EU-3 talking to the Iranians about not enriching and not reprocessing.

People are coming together around a set of steps that the Iranians must take if they are going to increase confidence or if they are going to give any confidence to the international community that they intend to live up to their obligations.

MR. LEHRER: Finally, Madame Secretary, a personal question. It appears, just to outsiders watching you, that you enjoy being Secretary of State of the United States. Is that true?

SECRETARY RICE: I do enjoy it. It is a great job at a great time. This is a wonderful time for those of us who care about the spread of freedom and liberty and it's a great time for the Euro-Atlantic alliance and for other democratic friends --

MR. LEHRER: Is that in better shape now? Do you think that's in better --

SECRETARY RICE: I think the Euro-Atlantic alliance is in great shape. We were joking with some of us saying -- in fact, some people repeated it publicly -- that we can stop talking about what is the health of the Euro-Atlantic alliance and we can start putting it to work for great causes. And in fact, because this is an alliance that has been so successful, the most successful alliance in history, an alliance that held together despite the threat of a huge superpower with 30,000 nuclear weapons and 5 million men under arms --

MR. LEHRER: The Soviet Union, correct?

SECRETARY RICE: The Soviet Union. Held together to see a Europe whole and free and at peace, and now to see the members of that alliance speaking out in support of people to whom those freedoms have long been denied, to see people coming to understand that there is a possibility of a different kind of Middle East than we've all become accustomed to over the last 60 years --

MR. LEHRER: The Iraq breach has been --

SECRETARY RICE: -- is very exciting.

MR. LEHRER: The Iraq breach has been healed?

SECRETARY RICE: People have moved on. We know that there were differences. Of course, there were differences about Iraq. But there is no difference on the following point, which is that Iraq must be stable; Iraqis deserve the support of the international community, given the risk that they have now demonstrated that they are willing to take; and that the world is going to be a much better place with Saddam Hussein gone; and with an Iraq in the middle of the Arab world that we now see is demonstrating to the Middle East and more broadly that people really do desire freedom, that it is a universal aspiration.

And if you take that in the context of what is happening in other parts of the Middle East, if you take that in the context of the beginnings of a democratic Palestinian state, if you take that in the context of people in the streets of Lebanon who have lost their fear of the Syrians, and on and on and on, this great alliance may say that its best days are still ahead of it.

MR. LEHRER: Madame Secretary, thank you very much.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

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