



Interview With Hisham Melhem of Al Arabiya's "Across the Ocean"

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
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(1:00 p.m. EST)

MR. MELHEM: Let me welcome you, Madame, first. *Wazeera* Rice, (inaudible), *shukran*. Thank you.

Dr. Rice, you've been calling for a swift implementation of Resolution 1559, calling on the Syrians to leave Lebanon forthwith. Does that mean that this resolution supercede the 1989 Taif resolution?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Resolution 1559 is a UN Security Council resolution. That means that the international community has spoken with its strongest voice and it should be clearly -- clear to the Syrians that it is time to honor that resolution. I spoke a few days ago with the French Foreign Minister publicly about this, and France and the United States were the sponsors. But this is spoken for the entire international community and I certainly hope that the Syrians will respond.

MR. MELHEM: President Bashar Assad of Syria in published interviews gave kind of conflicting positions: at one time, he linked the withdrawal to the freedom and peace; in other interviews, he said yes, in principle, it will happen in a few months, but no timetable.

What do you make of this?

SECRETARY RICE: I don't know what to make of the remarks by President Assad. I only know that there are no conditions attached to Resolution 1559. It says very simply that Syrian forces, Syrian military forces, and, in fact, Syrian security forces, intelligence forces, also need to withdraw and Syria needs to leave the Lebanese people to determine their own future.

That is really the point here. The Lebanese people are in the streets of Beirut to say that the time has come for them to pursue their aspirations without foreign interference, without foreign contamination. This is not an issue of the United States or France or anyone else. This is an issue for the Lebanese people, and the Syrians should respect the role of the Lebanese people.

MR. MELHEM: Were you surprised as an observer of world affairs that this country which used to be at one time synonymous with chaos, and Lebanonization replaced balkanization, if you remember, at the level of the kind of civility, maturity? I mean, what do you make of it as someone who is watching it as an American official but also as an observer of international politics?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I cease any longer to be amazed at what people can do when they are seeking human dignity and seeking to fulfill their aspirations. The Lebanese people, we've always known, are a sophisticated people, many of them, and educated people, people with a great heritage and a great culture.

And yes, there were difficulties in the past and yes, there were divisions. But I am quite confident and the United States is quite confident that in the context of democratic reforms and democratic institutions, the Lebanese people can resolve their differences and can continue toward a better future. And so I have ceased to be surprised at what people can do when they have a chance to be given voice.

MR. MELHEM: Dr. Rice, if Syria does not withdraw, what are the tools in your toolbox, as you say in the United States, both diplomatically and economically?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, right now, we are concentrating on diplomatic efforts to get the Syrians to see that this is a time to conform to the will of the international community. Of course, the United States has also used limited sanctions against Syria under the Syrian Accountability Act and we have other sanctions that we could apply, but we think for now the key is that the international community is speaking with one voice and the Syrians should hear that voice.

The Syrians have engaged in behavior that has made it not only difficult for the Lebanese people to fulfill their aspirations, but because insurgents have been supported from Syrian territory, Iraqis have died and are having difficulties fulfilling their aspirations; because there are Palestinian rejectionists who are operating in Syria, Palestinians are in a situation in which they cannot fulfill their aspirations because those rejectionists are determined to blow up the very real prospects for peace that we have now between Palestine and the Israelis.

So the Syrians should listen to the will of the international community, but perhaps more importantly they should listen to the will of the Lebanese people and the Iraqi people and the Palestinian people to have a better future.

MR. MELHEM: What do you make of the Syrian pronouncements that they would like to resume negotiations with the Israelis without any conditions? Is this a ploy? Does it reflect a sincere desire? Does it reflect a state of siege? What do you make of them?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I don't know what to make of the statement but I do note the Syrians always talk about their desire for a comprehensive peace. But if they desire a comprehensive peace, then they should do everything that they can to shut down the terrorist organizations that are operating in Syria, who want to blow up any chances for a comprehensive peace.

And so, to me, there is a contradiction here: the Syrians say they want peace with Israel; at the same time, from the territory of Damascus, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad is using suicide bombers in Tel Aviv. How are people to read this? I don't think they can take this seriously.

MR. MELHEM: To go back to sanctions. Is it a fair assumption to say that the sword of the sanctions is aiming on them?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the Congress has given the Administration the possibility of sanctions and we continue to explore when it might be necessary to use them. Currently, of course, we have already used some of the sanctions under the Syrian Accountability Act. But this is not the United States and Syria. This is the international community and Syria, and more importantly it is the Lebanese people, the Palestinian people and the Iraqi people. Now, that is really the story here.

MR. MELHEM: Will the United States be, at one time, ready or willing to push for a resolution at the United Nations Security Council to either expand the United Nations military presence in south Lebanon or to change the mandate to fill in the gap, if somebody talks about a gap, if the Syrians leave?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first things first. We need to get the Syrians to leave and then the Lebanese people can decide their future. And I'm quite certain that the international community will be responsive to what the Lebanese people -- represented then by a government that truly represents them -- that I'm sure the international community will be responsive to whatever the Lebanese need.

MR. MELHEM: Is it fair to say that the United States will not support parliamentary elections taking place in Lebanon in the spring if the Syrians remained in Lebanon, and definitely if they remained around the greater territory?

SECRETARY RICE: You cannot have free and fair elections with the kind of Syrian presence and interference that you have currently in Lebanon. These would be elections that would be contaminated by the Syrian presence. That is one reason that Resolution 1551 talks first about Syrian withdrawal and then talks also about the need for free and fair elections free of foreign interference.

So it is, in effect, a -- would be a contradiction to try to have free and fair elections with a Syrian presence of the kind that you have there now. And again, it's not just Syrian military forces. That is one matter. But everyone knows the deep interference of Syrian security personnel into the daily affairs of the Lebanese people and --

MR. MELHEM: Invisible men.

SECRETARY RICE: -- and their visibility.

MR. MELHEM: Okay. Dr. Rice, one final question on Lebanon. The President will be meeting with the Patriarch of the Maronite community in Lebanon, Cardinal Sfeir, on the 16th of this month. What do you expect from this visit? I mean, how does the Patriarch's -- the importance of the Patriarch goes beyond his own community.

SECRETARY RICE: Yes.

MR. MELHEM: What do you expect from him?

SECRETARY RICE: I would expect that this greatly respected figure will be received in the United States as a symbol of tolerance in Lebanon and the willingness to understand that a Lebanon that is moving toward a democratic future will be a Lebanon in which all Lebanese are represented and respected with -- regardless to ethnic background, regardless to religious orientation. Democracies have a way of being able through their institutions to take account of these many differences and that is what this is meant to symbolize.

MR. MELHEM: Let's move to the London conference. You just came back from London. I mean, if Palestinian reform is predicated on a Palestinian will to reform political institutions and to deliver on the -- in the areas of security, is it also predicated on the Israelis doing something, countermeasures like getting rid of the checkpoints, releasing funds or releasing prisoners?

SECRETARY RICE: It is absolutely the case that the Palestinians have responsibilities and the Israelis have responsibilities. And the Israelis have responsibilities to create conditions in which a democratic Palestinian state could emerge. And that means freedom of movement for the Palestinian people. It means efforts to end the suffering. The Palestinian people have suffered too long. It means efforts to erase some of the past by dealing with the prisoner issue.

But I do believe that we also have a different situation because the Israelis have made an historic decision to withdraw from the Gaza and four settlements in the West Bank. So taken together, the Israelis have responsibilities but they've also added some new elements to this march toward, hopefully, a peaceful resolution.

And, of course, the Palestinians at the conference said to the international community that they were ready to fight terror, ready to unify their security services, ready to have transparent and democratic institutions, both economically and politically.

MR. MELHEM: Dr. Rice, you spoke, as well as the President, forcefully, eloquently, about the need for a viable Palestinian state, and viability means contiguity; and yet, recently the Israeli Government announced that they want to build new housing units and expand some settlements. What do you make of this?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, American policy has been very clear on this matter, which is that no one should try and prejudge the outcome of a final settlement. And that means that the Israelis should not engage in acts that might prejudice. We have talked to them about this. We have talked about the route of the fence, for instance, that it should not be a political statement in any way.

And I believe that the process continues to move forward with some momentum. We will see that the two sides get every more investment in a positive outcome and that some of these issues will then be taken care of.

MR. MELHEM: Time is running out. I have to move to Iraq and Egypt. Just a quick question on the Palestinians. With the exception of the Saudis, most Arab states are not -- did not deliver on their promises to the Palestinians in terms of the donors conferences and all that. Did you do some arm-twisting, to put it diplomatically?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we're clearly engaging in diplomacy on this matter, which is to say to everyone not just to pay our pledges -- that's important -- but to see how much you can do now for the Palestinian people, not how little, because if Mahmoud Abbas is going to have an opportunity to show his people that there is a better future, there is a lot of development that will need to be done, a lot of reconstruction that will be needed in the Gaza when the Israelis withdraw. And so not only are we and others asking that people pay pledges that they've made in the past, but they make new commitments to what could be a very hopeful future.

MR. MELHEM: Okay, let's jump to Iraq. Time is running.

Iraq is experiencing the joy of coalition building and juggling for power and understanding the requirements of building a government and not to have sole control by any party. Are you somewhat concerned that this could take too long and create some uncertainties?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it is absolutely the case that the Iraqis need to do this on a timetable that will allow them to be sure they are ready for elections at the end of 2005. They need to get a constitution written in short order. But I also understand that they are trying after the elections now to build a unity government, one that can represent all Iraqis where all Iraqis will be respected, and this is an important process that they're going through. But it is also important that they be ready for constitution writing and ultimately for the elections at the end of 2005.

MR. MELHEM: We hear all sorts of stories about Iranian meddling in the politics of Iraq, in Iraq not only in terms of maybe arming some people who helped insurgent groups, but also may be engaged indirectly or maybe directly with this jockeying that is taking place. How concerned are you about Iranian playing the -- of Iranian role?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we are most concerned about Iranian interference. The Iraqi Government, some of the Iraqi leaders, have been concerned about Iranian interference. This should be a process in which Iraq's neighbors are interested but in which Iraq's neighbors realize that it is an Iraqi process, and so there should be no interference of this kind from anyone, and that includes Iran. And we have been concerned about it. We have seen reports. But it is extremely important that the Iraqis be allowed to do this on their own.

MR. MELHEM: On Egypt -- I wish I could talk more about Iraq, but on Egypt it was reported that you postponed -- not canceled -- a trip to Egypt because of what

happened to Mr. Ayman Nour and it was also reported that you had some tense meeting maybe with your Egyptian counterpart when he was in town. What is the state of play between the two countries now, especially on the issue of reform, elections, human rights?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have good relations with Egypt across a broad front of issues -- a good partner in the peace process, a good partner in fighting the war on terrorism. But as the President said, we expect a lot of our friends these days when the United States has said very clearly that the Middle East should also be a region in which democracy spreads and in which people have the human dignity that comes with democracy and the ability to freely pursue one's aspirations.

And in that regard we have talked a lot with the Egyptians about this and the president has recently announced some important changes. We hope that those changes -- to allow multiparty candidates -- will also include what is needed in an election; that is, that there is access to media and that people can debate freely. These are important steps.

And of course we have been concerned about Ayman Nour and hope that he will be released soon.

MR. MELHEM: One final quick one. Of course you know that there are people who criticize United States, saying they are interfering in internal affairs, domestic affairs, they are, you know, playing hard politics and stuff. But there are many others also who say maybe United States is not doing enough in terms of speaking out publicly when human rights violations occurs in those countries that have been friendly to the United States for a long time -- Egypt, Saudi Arabia, others.

How do you deal with this, given also that there are some -- these tentative limited moves toward empowerment within Saudi Arabia or Egypt and other places?

SECRETARY RICE: I would like to say to your viewers, to people who may view this program, the United States fully accepts that for 60 years the policies of our government and many of the West was to turn a blind eye to the freedom deficit, to value stability at the expense of democracy. And we learned that we were really getting neither.

And now that the President of the United States has said, and I think increasingly much of the Euro-Atlantic alliance is saying, is that the Middle East is no different. People's aspirations for freedom are universal. And we simply do not believe that there are people someplace in the world who do not want to be free, who do not want the human dignity of being able to pursue their aspirations.

One does not have to impose democracy. You impose tyranny. One does not have to interfere in people's affairs to get them to want democracy. We have seen it in the Palestinian territories with their elections. We have seen it in Iraq with their elections, where people in Iraq braved terrorist threats and terrible events in order to vote. And we see it now in Lebanon.

And so this is not a process that the United States can carry out or can direct. All that the United States can do is to say that it is absolutely right that those in the Arab world, those in the Muslim world, those in the Middle East, would have the same human dignity that all of us enjoy to say what we think, to worship as we please, and to have the human dignity of freedom.

MR. MELHEM: *Wazeera* Condoleezza Rice, *shukran*. Thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

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