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## Interview With Nadia Bilbassy of Al Arabiya

**Robert B. Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State**

Washington, DC  
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(3:40 p.m. EDT)

**QUESTION:** Mr. Zoellick, thank you very much for joining us and I thank you for your time. I'm going to start with the latest, which is what Ambassador Khalilzad said. He said that time is running out with Syria and he said all options are open. What does it mean? Does it mean that there's an escalation with the pressure on Syria? And what does all options are open [mean]?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** Well, as Prime Minister Ja'afari and the other Iraqi leaders have said, the success in dealing with the counterinsurgency, in part, depends on the cooperation of Iraq's neighbors. And the world knows that you've been having a transit of people from Syria into Iraq that have been killing themselves, and often others, as part of the terrorist network, and it has to be stopped. And it is a point that the Iraqis have made and we have made to the Syrians as well. And we hope it will be stopped. And we hope that the Syrians also recognize that terrorists may end up threatening them as well.

And so it is part of an overall effort that we have to try to help Iraq stand up on its own. And Iraq, as you know, has been making progress in terms of its own political discourse. But when you have people coming from outside your country to attack innocent people and blow themselves up, you can see why everybody doesn't like the results, so I hope the Syrians get the message.

**QUESTION:** But you've been saying that for a while. This is not something new. I mean is this a new threat when we talk about all options open? Does this include a military strike, for example?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** Well, I think we've been serious about this for a very long time. And I think what Ambassador Khalilzad is doing is, again, emphasizing the seriousness that the U.S. Government has, trying to make sure that Syria does what it can do. Look, a lot of these people are coming in through the airport in Damascus, so it's, you know, sometimes you read these stories about, well, it's hard to stop the border. Well, it's not hard to stop people coming through the airport and that's where they ought to start.

**QUESTION:** If they don't, what the U.S. can do?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** I don't deal with hypotheticals. Right now I am trying to stress, as Ambassador Khalilzad is, what needs to happen.

**QUESTION:** We talk again, and with the Syria question was the visit of Bashar al Assad to New York. We were told that he was coming and then he canceled his visit. And some people read between the lines that basically the U.S. told him he won't be welcomed if he does come because he can be excluded from meeting with Secretary Rice next week. Is this, again, another message that's trying to say no to Syria, you're not really happy with the way that they've been dealing with Iraq, with other issues?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** Well, it certainly wouldn't be my role to step into the Syrian mind and determine why their leaders don't come. I mean it is a UN General Assembly. I suspect it has more to do with the fact that Syria feels under some pressure from UN investigations about its behavior in Lebanon. Obviously, Resolution 1559 required a withdrawal and the UN has led an effort to investigate the murders and some of the fingers were starting to point rather close to figures in Damascus. So, you know, I can't guess what's in the Syrians' mind, but I think it is one more example of where we hope that Syrian behavior will improve.

Syria has been, as you know, the location of people who've been involved in terrorism in the Middle East peace process, not just threatening Israel, but threatening the Palestinians. And so that's another example of where we hope that Syrian behavior will change. But, you know, at this point, the one that I think is most important, frankly, is the one you started with on Iraq.

**QUESTION:** But also you've been very unhappy about the interference of Syria in Lebanon. In a statement that you issued two days ago, I think the State Department -- I'm talking about -- and the White House, saying that the President Lahoud, for example, in the constitution amendment that brought him to power was as a result of illegitimate and excessive Syrian interference. What happened with President Lahoud? I mean, again, there was confusion. Was he invited or not invited to that reception by the President?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** I don't know the particulars of details of invitations. All I can say is that you had movement in Lebanon and the people, who wanted to reassert their own sovereignty and independence. You had an election process where they've been able to speak; it's been backed by people throughout the Arab world as well as people in Europe and the United States. And we hope that the people of Lebanon will be able to find their own future without Syrian interference.

So the issues, that you're really raising, in a sense identify some of the problems that Syria's had with its neighbors; it's not just us, with Iraq, with Lebanon or other parties or, frankly, putting at risk what a number of people are trying to do, say with the Palestinian Authority, trying to find an opportunity for peace. Look, you just had a historic withdrawal from the Gaza. There are some great opportunities here that Abu Mazen is trying to develop.

Prime Minister Sharon took great risks, which you can see in terms of his own political future in terms of trying to take these steps. So this is a time to try to capture this movement that we see -- which is still not developed enough -- but for elections, for peace, for people being able to determine their own future. You had a historic event in Egypt recently, which there's a lot of work to go and we're looking at the parliamentary elections next, but Syria stands out against that. And we hope that Syria will come out in a different position.

**QUESTION:** Well, we'll come back to this in a minute. But just if you focus on President Lahoud, do you consider him a legitimate president?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** I'm not going to add anything to what we've already said about that.

**QUESTION:** Fine. If we go again to the meeting in the UN and with the Syrian-Lebanon issue, you invited Prime Minister Siniora and the Foreign Minister. What kinds of talks will you be engaging with him? I mean they're welcome. My understanding is that they are being invited to talk with Administration.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** So which talks are you focusing on?

**QUESTION:** I'm talking about Syria and Lebanon, with the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Siniora.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** Yes, well, I think what we're trying to do is follow through on the UN's policy of 1559, which is to now have an independent Lebanon, not have the [Syrian] influence. You've had the withdrawal of troops. There are still questions about ongoing influence on the intelligence side. But right now the focus is also on the investigations because you've had this pattern of assassinations. And I think it is very important that the international community try to get to the bottom of what the cause of those are, because obviously it frightens people in Lebanon as they look to their own future.

So this is an issue that the Lebanese obviously need to discuss with the Syrians, but they need to do so with the recognition that not just the United States but the Europeans and others in the Arab community back the notion of having a Lebanon that is not controlled by Syria.

**QUESTION:** Again, if we move to Iraq, when we talk about the military operations in Tel Afar that's happening now. And we heard from the Ambassador today talking about the security situation and the ambition of trying to get Iraqi police and armed forces standing on their feet and have responsibility basically for the security of the country. But do you see it as somehow alienating some of the civilian population like we've seen in Fallujah? Do you see this also backfire on the efforts there?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** Well, I think most of the people have been alienated by people coming from the outside and trying to take over their communities. The reports that I've seen is that local authorities, local sheiks have, frankly, been fed up by this process and have been wondering whether the government is going to do what a government should do and protect them against it. So I was pleased to see that in these most recent operations, that the leading role was played by the Iraqi forces. Obviously the coalition forces or U.S. forces are working in close conjunction. But I think it is part of the bigger picture of changes going on in Iraq that, you know, it was very interesting to see the increased registration of Sunnis for the elections. And you get a debate about whether they will support the new constitution or not. But regardless of the views on their new constitution, they clearly don't want to repeat the experience of the last time where they didn't vote in the election, so you see this huge increase in registrations.

Well, you know, part of this is the Iraqis taking control of their own future, their own political future with this constitution. They will make a decision. An election process, which still too many people in the region don't have the opportunity to partake in. How that relates to their own economic future and reconstruction, and then obviously it's the question of dealing with people from the outside or an internal insurgency that tries to threaten this future.

So, you know, what I think is important is that people look to Iraqis coming together as Iraqis. There's obviously Kurds, there's Sunni, there's Shia, but one hopes that what comes out of this crucible is a sense of a center, of a group of people that stand for the future of Iraq.

Obviously any time that you have conflict, there is a danger of people being hurt. Our forces, the Iraqi forces, I think try to go to great lengths not to harm the civilian population. But it's the people who take over the towns and threaten others in Iraq who are agents of violence there. So you know, one wishes that one could be able to deal with these forces without taking military action. But the alternative is to allow them to try to use these positions to use them as launching points for attacks elsewhere in Iraq and then other innocent people get hurt.

**QUESTION:** You know, I mean you acknowledge that the security situation is pretty dismal and we still don't have political progress. We'll have to see about a constitution and election (Inaudible). How would you measure success in Iraq? What is it that you will say?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** Well, first off, I think, you know, it is important for everybody to recognize that this is a long, hard effort. I meet with, you know, Iraqi officials from different capacities, different parts of the Iraqi community, both in Iraq -- I've taken three trips there in the past couple months and also here in the United States. And I, frankly, am deeply impressed by the courage and commitment of these people who are putting their lives on the line every day to do so. So to bring together a formula for success, the key part is to have Iraqis determine their own future. They will make their decisions.

We obviously encourage them to do so in a democratic fashion that draws together Iraqis of different views and different backgrounds. You can see that happening. Now, of course, if you're used to an authoritarian system, it looks messy, because people are debating -- people are arguing different points of view. But that is what happens in a democratic process. That needs to be combined with additional training of Iraqi forces, so that they can stand up and protect their own country. At least what we have also seen is that as Iraqis get a better sense that they will be determining their own future, it also affects the ability to deal with the counterinsurgency, because people have a sense that their future depends on the cooperation of the public with the Iraqi military forces that are being built up. And then there needs to be an economic and reconstruction component, so people have a chance for improving their lives, to be able to create additional jobs. There's been a lot done in terms of health systems, water systems and electricity systems, but all of it's at risk if people blow things up and threaten us.

So if you look at the history of insurgencies, for example, the one that took place in Malaya, it took many years to deal with because you can have a relatively small number of people that are still committed to violence and suicide in this case, that can disrupt a society. So I think the benchmarks are whether Iraqis are able to seize control of their own future, do so in a way that builds support among the public and eventually turns back those that are committed to violence, as opposed to solving problems through democratic debate. And that goes back to your first question. It's much harder to do if your neighbors are the vehicles for sending people across the borders that are committed to suicide bombs.

**QUESTION:** That's precisely the question is how long is the United States willing to stay in Iraq, considering that insurgencies can go on for years or sometimes decades?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** Well, as President Bush has said, you know, we have to be committed to this course. We still stand down as the Iraqi forces stand up. But we're not going to leave people in a lurch. We're committed to this. We believe that there are a lot of courageous people in Iraq who are, on the political side, the military side starting to take the future into their own hands. And so look, it's -- I've never believed that this was going to be an easy course. If you look at the history of Iraq, it's been a country that was put together, in part, through a British colonial mandate that involved very different parties and the Sunnis were in a controlling position for many, many years. Many Sunnis continue to be disturbed by the fact that they will no longer have the majority of the votes. But I think as they also consider the alternatives in their role that they can play within the politics of Iraq, I hope that its new center will be created. Ultimately, that's for the Iraqi people to determine, but we certainly want to try to give them every opportunity and that's why we work with them and others internationally, you know, the British, the Japanese, other countries.

**QUESTION:** We go to Gaza. The Israeli has ended -- Israeli forces ended 38 years of occupation. Abu Mazan said that this is a good day, but the next step should be a Palestinian state. Is it imminent? What's the next step?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** Well, I think the next step is really to consolidate the success which, in part, means to help the Palestinians with their economic future. It is one thing to have the Israelis out. Now the Palestinians have to step up and be able to create a non-corrupt government that creates some economic opportunity and hope for their people. At the same time, as the Israelis have stated, they also have planned some withdrawals on the West Bank and there is also going to be a political challenge for Sharon in being able to carry this future.

Under the steps of the roadmap, which we've worked out with other countries, as well as the Palestinian Authority and the Israelis, there needs to be a phase now where the Palestinians also take on the network of terror. But we understand that there needs to be a sense of a future. President Bush has said our view of what we hope that future will be, that there will be two democratic states living in peace next to each other. But both sides have obligations and it is very, very important that the new Palestinian Authority, democratically elected, be able to follow through, first for its own people, to be able to demonstrate the future it is trying to create, that there's some sense of opportunity so people don't have to live in the past of hate, that they can look to a future of having a chance to make lives better for their children. But also to deal with this terrorist network because if you're going to have people who want to continue to threaten Israel's very existence -- its very existence, then it is going to be pretty hard to have a negotiation on two states living in peace.

**QUESTION:** When you talk about terrorist organizations, you mean Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The Israelis said they don't want him to be part of the election. The U.S. always considers them as terrorist organizations. What would you do if they've been elected? I mean, do you really, first of all, believe they should be part of integrated into a political system?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** We believe that people should take the democratic course and not the course of violence. What some of those organizations have done is they are trying to maintain both paths. They are trying to sort of participate in elections, but maintain the option of violence. That's not the way to build a stable society and it's not the way to be able to try to work out a future with Israel that we hope can be achieved. So we hope that all parties, including the ones you mentioned, take a democratic path, but they can't do so if they maintain the idea that they are going to have a gun in one hand and ballot in another.

**QUESTION:** If they do, would you talk to them?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** Well, as a terrorist organization, and right now that's what they are and they probably assume that they are, we will not be dealing with them, for that very reason. One has to draw a line. One has to say to parties in this region, which we know very, very well, that there is a future if you choose a peaceful, democratic course. You can see in Iraq, there's vigorous debates going on among different parties and it can be very, very tough. But it is one thing if you're debating, it is another thing if you're killing one another. People have to make that choice. And if they're going to stay on the path of trying to have violence and destroy, that violence and destruction will eventually consume them and their children again and that's the opportunity that people have. It's one where we can help create the framework but ultimately has to be their choice.

**QUESTION:** I have one question about --

**MR. MILLS:** Last one.

**QUESTION:** I have one last question. I'm sorry about this. Iran -- questions of the nuclear (inaudible) basically. Are you going to take it to the Security Council? I mean, we've seen (inaudible) with Russia and China and India now trying to also work in parallel to the E-3. What will happen in the UN?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK:** Well, it is not just our decision. This goes back to the IAEA. As you know, we have been supporting the EU-3's discussions with the Iranians. We hope that others in the world will be disappointed, as we were, that the Iranians went back on their agreement, including with the EU-3, and have started to restart their nuclear program again. That's not a good basis for a negotiation. It's a preemptive action. Now this is particularly troublesome because one has to ask, you know, why does Iran, given its extraordinary oil and natural gas resources, seem so committed to developing nuclear capabilities? Given Iran's support for terrorism, there is obviously a very deep concern about its developing weapons of mass destruction and missiles to carry them. That becomes a disruptive force. Now there are other issues with Iran. The human rights people in Iran, you know, there were elections in Iran, but a rather -- an elite group of people got to decide who could run. And instead, we saw the reform movement that, I think, people had invested some hopes in a few years ago, seems to be dissipating.

People seem to be sort of giving up the sense that the elections in Iran create enough legitimacy for them to have a chance to encourage change. We think there's so many people in Iran who want to have change. And if you go to the younger generation, you can see this course. But this is an issue that is not only for the United States, it is also for the Europeans, and as you mentioned, the Chinese, the Indians, the Russians. And we hope to be able to get people to recognize the risks of a nuclear Iran and the risks of nuclear proliferation. Look, if you are in Russia, those are real risks for you, as well as for others in the region or the United States.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you very much for the interview.  
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