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Interview on Al Arabiya with Taher Barakeh

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Manama, Bahrain
November 12, 2005

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, thanks for joining us on Al Arabiya News Channel. First, we are going to start with the Syrian issue. The 1636 resolution reminded the Arabs, actually, in this situation, of Iraq before the invasion. Is Syria now going in the same path of Iraq before the invasion?

SECRETARY RICE: Syria has an opportunity to put forward the path that it wishes to put forward. The UN Security Council demanded only one thing, and that is cooperation, full cooperation, with the Mehlis investigation, because the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri has got to be solved and justice has got to be done for that.

The Lebanese people are acting bravely in seeking their political freedom after years of occupation and I think everybody has been inspired by the Cedar Revolution. But in order for Lebanon to have closure and reconciliation and to move forward, the Hariri assassination really must be solved and those who are responsible must be punished. So that is the road for Syria and it needs to be taken, and taken immediately.

QUESTION: And if Syria doesn't cooperate?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the UN Security Council has said that it will come back to determine what further steps or measures might be necessary. But the key here is that cooperation is in the hands of the Syrians. The entire community, international community, is united in demanding that this cooperation be offered. The vote was 15 to nothing. And so Syria needs to take the message.

And it's not helpful for the Syrians to make accusations about the nature of the investigation or to rant and rave against those who are against Syria. You know, the people of Syria also deserve to know what has happened here and we stand with people all over the Middle East who are trying to make a better future, a better and more prosperous and more democratic future.

QUESTION: There is public opinion in the Arab world saying that America is going to military action against Syria whatever the Syrian opinion is, if it's cooperation or not.

SECRETARY RICE: America is united with the members of the UN Security Council in demanding cooperation on the Mehlis investigation. That's what this is about.

Obviously, we also want to insist that Syria live up to the terms of Resolution 1559 because Lebanon should be free from foreign interference, Lebanon should not be threatened and intimidated by what is being said by assassinations that go well beyond what happened to Rafik Hariri.

And of course, yes, we have concerns that the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, that the Palestinian rejectionists not use those camps or their offices in Syria to frustrate the hopes of the Palestinian people. And yes, it is important that Syria cut off the infiltration and penetration of the terrorists into Iraq who are killing innocent Iraqis.

So this is a matter of innocent Iraqis that are being killed because Syria will not control its territory, innocent Palestinians who are trying to create a state and a better future who are being frustrated by Palestinian rejectionists, Palestinian Islamic Jihad operating out of Syria, and the Lebanese who want a free future, free of foreign interference, they want to know what happened to their prime minister, and Syria frustrates that.

So this is not the United States and Syria. This is Syria and the people of Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and of Iraq.

QUESTION: Yes, let us stay in Lebanon, about Hezbollah exactly. Could the Lebanese Government, the former opposition parties, convince the United States that negotiations with Hezbollah can really end in disarming Hezbollah?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Resolution 1559 is very clear that there needs to be disarmament of militias and there's a reason for that, which is that no democratic state can operate when groups within it want both to be able to participate in politics and to keep an option for violence. Any military means, any option for the use of force, has to be the preserve only of the state. And that is what Resolution 1559 is saying.

So this is a Lebanese process and I think people can see that the United States has been very considerate of this Lebanese process of how these issues are resolved after long years of occupation. But ultimately Resolution 1559 speaks to the need to disarm militias and that has to be done.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, are we becoming closer and closer to the announcement of the troops' withdrawal from Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, as the Iraqis are more capable themselves, the United States, and I'm sure Great Britain and other coalition members, want to have our forces out of Iraq. This is not an issue of wanting to stay where we're not needed, but we are there under a UN Security Council mandate because the Iraqis need the help of the multinational forces against the terrorists who are killing innocent Iraqis. These are cowardly people who are killing children and killing school teachers.

In fact, the entire Middle East we see right now in a struggle between those who have an ideology of hatred, that kills innocents at a Palestinian wedding in Jordan or schoolchildren in Iraq or a prime minister in Lebanon, violent people; and then you have on the other side the kind of hopeful future that we are engaged in, talking about here in the Broader Middle East Initiative here at the Forum for the Future in Bahrain.

QUESTION: In this issue, Madame Secretary, what kind of messages are you going to hold to the Palestinians and to the Israelis?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, when I leave the Forum for the Future here, which is talking about a democratic and prosperous future for the Middle East, I look forward to talking to the Israelis and Palestinians about a different kind of future for them as well, one in which there is a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel, one in which terrorists and terrorism have no place, one in which the Palestinian people can freely seek their aspirations for prosperity and future of democracy.

I will say to the Israelis that they have obligations. They need to freeze settlements. They need to deal with the route of the seam line fence so that it does not disadvantage Palestinians. And they really must take no steps that are going to try and prejudice a final status agreement.

It is also true that the Palestinians must fight terrorism and reorganize their security forces and move on a democratic path. But if both parties will do this and if the Arab world will support them by condemning terrorism and stopping incitement toward terrorism, we have the possibility of a Palestinian state, and what a great future that will be.

QUESTION: So the last question. Will there be any move in your visit to Palestine this time?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, this time I am going to consult with the parties about the post-disengagement period. Obviously, the Palestinians are getting ready for elections, but we have been working very hard with Mr. Wolfensohn and with General Ward on helping to reform Palestinian security institutions, on trying to put forward projects that are making the Gaza a better place. You know, the United States is sponsoring water projects in the Gaza, people are building schools and clinics and housing in the Gaza, and those activities I intend to discuss when I'm there.

QUESTION: Thanks very much, Madame Secretary, for joining us.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you. Thank you very much.

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