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## Interview on Al Arabiya with Nadia Bilbassy-Charters

**C. David Welch**, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs

Washington, DC  
February 14, 2006

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Are we going to do the questions in Arabic?

**QUESTION:** Yeah. I can repeat them in English.

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Would you mind?

**QUESTION:** A year after Hariri's assassination, does the United States still committed to the investigation and do you want to see international trial for his killers?

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Ms. Nadia, thank you for having me with you today to speak to you and your viewers. This is a really important day and we recall the memory of Rafik Hariri and those who perished with him on that terrible day a year ago.

A lot has happened in the year since. Among the things that have happened is the decision by the international community to launch an investigation because of the implications of this crime which may possibly involve other states.

We would like to see that investigation pursued to its fullest, to reveal the truth, wherever that may be. The resolution that established the investigation is clear that all parties and all states should cooperate with it. We believe that that cooperation should be forthcoming and we are disappointed that Syria has been delaying and been postponing its responses.

If it's necessary, the international community is prepared to support Lebanon in looking at ways to help in the prosecution of those who are responsible. Of course, the investigation must gather information and charge people with a crime before there can be a prosecution, and we have to examine that when we see it. But I am confident that given the magnitude of this tragedy, especially that it involved the murder of a public figure with not just Lebanese support and reputation but regional and international reputation, I'm sure that the international community will stand beside Lebanon in any way that it thinks is necessary to see that justice is done.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, if the investigation commission asks to speak to anyone in Syria, they should respond by making themselves available for the interview. That's a requirement of international law; it's not something that can be questioned; it won't be abridged and there is no limit to which -- to how that may be extended. No one is immune.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

And would you call for Assad an immediate, you know, assistant to the investigation?

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, if that's what the commission wants, then they should receive it. And my understanding is the commission has asked to interview a number of Syrians and they should all cooperate. If that includes the President of Syria, then he should cooperate and there is no reason for any delay. If, as the Government of Syria has repeatedly claimed, it has no involvement in this crime, then I don't understand what the reason for any delay is.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, look, given the long history of Syrian infiltration into Lebanon, into its political life, with a meaningful intelligence presence on the ground, with a powerful security and military presence, there's every reason from history to be concerned about this. Syrian military forces have withdrawn from Lebanon. If anything, that's one of the most important by-products of the murder of former Prime Minister Hariri. But we still regrettably have reason to be concerned about Syrian influence inside Lebanon. And what's most regrettable about that, because we understand that Lebanese people themselves cannot control everything -- what's really regrettable here is that the Government of Syria thinks it necessary to do these kinds of things, even in the face of the real desire of the Lebanese people to be left to mind their own business.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** We want to see the democratic process unfold as it should in Lebanon according to the laws of the country without any outside interference. The extension of this mandate was questionable at the time and remains questionable now. The institution of the presidency is a valid and important one in Lebanon and we call for all people to respect it. That means that it should be occupied by a person who has arrived there through the democratic process in a fair, transparent and internationally credible way.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, the most interesting change involving the Vice Presidency in Syria has been the former Vice President's recent statements --

**QUESTION:** Abdel Halim Khaddam.

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Exactly. Mr. Khaddam has given a number of interviews, including to Arabiya, which -- very interesting what he has to say about the missed opportunities for real change and reform in Syria. Personally, I don't think the rearrangement of portfolios that we have seen recently has much content in terms of real reform, but I leave it to the Syrian people to make that judgment for themselves, if they are asked.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** We do have contacts with the Syrian Government at a lower level. As you know, we've withdrawn our Ambassador and we have formally now returned her to the States. I don't anticipate we will be sending an ambassador to Syria anytime soon given the policies and behavior of this government in Damascus. We do have some limited diplomatic contacts both in Damascus and here in Washington.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** It's a day of sorrow but it's also a day of remembrance, a day in which many, many Lebanese, as I see from the TV screens, are recalling this patriot, Rafik Hariri, and recalling the others who died with him that day. And they're saying to the world, many hundreds of thousands of them, we want to be free, we want to have hope, we want our nation to be left alone, we want to see a solid future, and we as Lebanese put this national value above all else. If hundreds of thousands are indeed in Martyrs' Square in Beirut today, as the news suggests they are, I think that represents an enormous percentage of the population and a united voice about the future of Lebanon, not just to recall the sad past.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, look, we don't know what the shape, direction and content of the new Palestinian government will be. On Saturday, the majlis will come together and that begins the process of government formation. We'll see what happens.

We respect that there was an election. We commend the Palestinian people for having a free vote by international standards, by doing so in safety and security, and we respect that outcome. But we can disagree with those who may have won some seats.

The international community is united behind three principles. If you want to have a negotiations process that leads to two states living side by side in peace and security, well then you have to recognize the right of the other to exist, so Hamas should recognize the right of Israel to exist.

Number two, the best way to pursue negotiations is in an atmosphere of security and nonviolence, so they should renounce terror and they should renounce violence.

Number three, Hamas itself ran in these elections, they won in these elections. These elections were established by agreement between the PLO and Israel. There are many such agreements. Do they or do they not accept the existing agreements that govern relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority? Do they or do they not accept the basis for peace that the international community has advocated since 1967 -- 242, 338? Do they or do they not accept the Beirut summit outcome? Do they or do they not accept this entire body of work done by many respectable people over all the years about how to move toward a future of freedom, security for both sides? They have to make some decisions on this and then we'll see.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, look, it's important that there should not be violence and terror. We agree with that. On the other hand, it's kind of hard to understand how you just sort of pause the machine for a little bit and what respect one should have for that. What does that mean about tomorrow? What would happen then?

You asked earlier also about their contacts with others, Russia and -- or whoever. Each nation will have to decide its position with respect to how they have contact with this group. We have our view. We don't hesitate to express it. I think you know it. It's a terrorist organization. We don't have any contact with Hamas. We're not seeking any, either directly or indirectly.

And with respect to how others do it, it's up to them. We would ask them to look very carefully at the position of the international community as laid out by the Quartet in London, of which Russia is a part, that establishes these three principles for what are the requirements here. And then it's up to Hamas to decide those.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, we're not seeking any mediation or any intermediaries. Our views are clear. I can't answer for Hamas, whether it's trying to do that. I'm not sure I understand their positions yet. There seem to be many things that need to be reconciled on their part, many decisions that they will have to make in order to earn the attention and respect of the international community.

And you know, let's remind ourselves too that what is at stake here is not whether somebody has a dialogue with one party or another. What is at stake is advancing the aspirations and the hopes of the Palestinian and Israeli peoples for real peace and security between the two. That is the responsibility. Israel is not going to go away. Israel is a member of the United Nations. It's going to be there tomorrow and the day after, et cetera. What is this organization going to do now with its responsibility? Then it will be up to the Palestinian people to decide how well they're doing it.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic....re New York Times.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** No, this is a false report. I believe it's been denied already by the Israeli Government and you will shortly see the same from the United States. But given that you're asking me this question now, let me just tell you before Sean McCormack does, no such plan.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Can you rephrase that, please, in English?

**QUESTION:** If you agree with me that the Palestinian election was democratic and free and fair, why would you threaten to cut aids to the Palestinian and punishing the very people you're trying to help?

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, look very carefully at what we've said. We have said that we will review our assistance to a Palestinian government in light of what it does with respect to the three principles that everybody agrees should be there: recognition of Israel's right to exist; renunciation of violence and terror; and acceptance of prior agreements and obligations.

We support the Palestinian people. We always have and I expect we will do so in the future. But the manner in which we do that will be reviewed by the U.S. Government. That's required under our law. It's necessary under these political circumstances. It may indeed have consequences for any support that we provide, but I can't say right now what those would be because we're still at the beginning of this review; and second, I don't know exactly what the political positions of the new government will be.

It's their responsibility, by the way, to answer the international community on this. I don't think that people will be content with a vague answer.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, I watched some of the trial proceedings yesterday, on Arabiya, in fact, late in the evening. I think the defendants, frankly, are making a joke of their own position. It's depressing to see that they come in the courtroom and abuse the law in this manner.

That said, the process of justice has to unfold. You know, I know in my heart what kind of criminal Saddam Hussein was, but I want to see justice done. I'm not amused when I see this in the courtroom; on the other hand, I think it's a fair way to proceed so that all Iraqis can understand exactly what happened.

What's unfortunate about the, with all due respect, if I may say, the television coverage is, you know, you focus on the show, not on the witnesses. When you focus on the witnesses and you hear about some of the tragedies that have occurred at this man's hands, then you understand the need for a trial.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** In a way, you're asking me again a similar question to one of your earlier ones. We believe in the democratic process. We don't -- elections are necessary but they're not sufficient for a democratic process. People need to come together in a way respecting each other's sometimes different views to decide on what's the appropriate solution for their situation and their political future. We don't interfere into this Iraqi discussion.

But look at how it's happening. It may not be perfect and, you know, maybe we don't agree with some of the positions of some of the parties, but at least they're sitting and they're debating these issues, they're coming together themselves and deciding who's going to represent them and how's it going to happen, and they take a vote about it. We respect that process. Again, I don't say it's perfect and it doesn't mean that we agree with any given position from any person or party, but we have to respect that the process occurs. That's important. That's how democracies develop. It's also rare in this part of the world so, I mean, I think people look at it very intensely and curiously as to what is happening.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** I don't expect that. We, the United States, would like a diplomatic solution to the problems that Iran has presented to the world with respect to its nuclear weapons program. That said, you know, the President of the United States traditionally reserves all his options to deal with a threat to our national security. We don't take anything off the table.


Instead, we want to focus people on what is on the table right now. What's on the table right now, even today, for the government in Tehran is an offer from the international community to negotiate this difficulty, but to do so in a manner in that respects the commitments and obligations Iran has itself undertaken to the IAEA and under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. It's respect for those obligations that we intend to see enforced. We believe the best path to that is a diplomatic one.

Regrettably, the Government of Iran seems to be, as we say, digging the hole deeper. We don't see that there is any serious, determined behavior on their part to try and address these concerns. It's disappointing and, frankly, it's isolating them more and more each day.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Thank you, Ms. Nadia

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