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## Interview on Al Hurra with Michel Ghandour

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

Washington, DC  
February 14, 2006

**QUESTION:** Mr. Welch, first, thanks for your time. Lebanon is commemorating today the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and thousands of people were gathered in the Martyr Place. And how do you see this event and what's your message to the Lebanese people on this day?

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, first --

**QUESTION:** Excuse me. Let me ask in Arabic, too.

(In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** First of all, we stand with the people of Lebanon in recalling the memory of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Mr. Basil Fuleihan and a number of their security people as well as many innocent people who were simply in the area who were all murdered one year ago today.

The memory of Rafik Hariri stands tall and proud in this region as representing the hopes and dreams of Lebanese to have a country that's free, safe, secure, stable and looking to a good future.

In the year since, I think all Lebanese who have been working to preserve the memory and to advance their country can look to substantial achievements. So on the one hand, our message to the Lebanese people is we stand with you in respect on this sad day; but on the other hand, our message is also that there have been important accomplishments and we can look to more in the future to preserve the freedom, security and stability of Lebanon.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Welch, the March 14th Movement leaders have called Lahoud, President Lahoud, to resign. What's your position regarding the presidential position in Lebanon and President Lahoud?

(In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** The democratic process in Lebanon is incomplete without addressing the situation of the presidency. The extension of his mandate was a flawed decision imposed from the outside. We would like to see Lebanon resolve this according to its own law, its own traditions, its own practice. We believe that that is an important next step.

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Look, I prefer not to function on the basis of individuals but rather to look at the importance of the office. It's very clear this is a flawed mandate, very clear that it was imposed in unusual circumstances, and the international community addressed the question in Resolution 1559. We look for that democratic process to be fulfilled in a way that all Lebanese can support and that would preserve the strength of the institution of the presidency.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Welch, the Lebanese Interior Minister has declared that al-Qaida has been trying to establish a presence in Lebanon and he said that organization is infiltrating its fighter and recruiting locally. How do you see this situation?

(In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, I think this news points to a very dangerous situation. Lebanon is vulnerable to abuse from outside, including the infiltration of people and material who would harm the security and stability of Lebanon. There's no excuse for this. So on the one hand, parties outside should not interfere in Lebanese affairs in any manner, whether those are states such as Iran and Syria or whether they are terrorist movements such as the one that you describe; on the other hand, there is, I think, an important responsibility for Lebanese to unit together to protect the security and stability of their country. There is no value that should be placed above Lebanese nationalism in this regard. We believe in a united, free and stable Lebanon and we in the United States and the international community will do a lot to support that.

So we call upon all Lebanese, whatever their political tendency or their affiliation, to gather together to protect their country. We see today that that is the aspiration of, as you said, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese gathered in Martyrs' Square. Look at that demonstration. That's a very big percentage of the population of Lebanon. And what are they speaking for? For the future.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Welch, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt said today that the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is a terrorist and President Assad has made a government shuffle in Syria and he promoted Foreign Minister Farouk Shara to be Vice President. How do you see these two links and how do you assess the situation?

(In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, I think -- I know and respect Mr. Walid Jumblatt. I believe he speaks for the concerns of many Lebanese who do not approve of the position of Syria with respect to Lebanon and are gravely worried about Syrian influence inside their country. That's a concern, I have to say, that is shared by many outside of Lebanon too, in the region, in Europe and in the United States.

On the changes within the Syrian Government, I don't frankly know that this amounts to very much except for the rearrangement of existing places. I would note that Mr. Farouk Shara replaces as Vice President a gentleman who is now outside giving his own views about the missed opportunities for real change and reform in Syria. I would also point out that at the end of the day the judgment of the Syrian people is the most important thing. It would not appear that any of these changes mean that the current regime in Damascus is going to ask the opinion of the people.

**QUESTION:** Do you have any contacts with Abdel Halim Khaddam?

(In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** No, we don't. We haven't decided not to. He's free to meet with whoever he wishes and say what he wants, in our judgment. But we haven't got any contacts with him.

**QUESTION:** And when you will decide to talk to him?

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, it's not that we've decided not to talk to him. We talk to everybody. But we don't presently have any political dialogue with him. He's making his statements and making his plans and I must say they're quite interesting statements. They seem to resonate with a lot of people.

**QUESTION:** President Bashar al-Assad has met with the Shiite Iraqi leader Muqtada al-Sadr twice in Damascus and al-Sadr declared that he's going to defend Syria with his supporters if the U.S. attacks it. How do you comment on that?

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, it's interesting that a number of people who visit with President al-Assad appear to all have the same mentality: They preach confrontation, violence and terror. I think if the Syrian regime is considering trying to change its international image it would do well to examine steps such as this, their meetings with extremist organizations including terrorist organizations, their lack of control of people who want to express their outrage in the streets but then resort to violence, even the instigation that occurs. This is frankly worrisome to see this pattern of behavior continuing on the part of the government in Syria.

**QUESTION:** Final question, Mr. Welch. Hamas is considering the formation of a technocrat government. How will you deal with such a government in the future?

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Well, I don't know what the plans of Hamas are with respect to forming a government. The Legislative Council of the Palestinian Authority will meet for the first time on Saturday, be sworn in, and after that the process of government formation begins and we'll have to see what the decision of Hamas is.

We believe this was a free and fair election. We respect that it was conducted in an atmosphere of security so that Palestinians could vote and have their votes heard. We don't agree with positions of the Hamas party. I think that's pretty obvious. We consider Hamas to be a terrorist organization.

And we'll review our relationship with that organization or, for that matter, any other according to three very straightforward principles that we have set out and which are endorsed by the international community.

Those are that because a relationship between parties in the peace process should be one where they negotiate their differences rather than fight about their differences, we think that all parties should renounce violence and terror.

Number two, if you're going to arrive at a state-to-state solution where Israel exists side by side in peace and security with a state called Palestine, then you have to recognize the right of the other to exist. And in this case, Hamas has not recognized that Israel has a right to exist.

Finally, there's a whole body of agreements between Israel and the PLO and Israel and the PA which are part of the fabric of negotiations and we don't know what the position of Hamas is with respect to those agreements. They should respect them. Interestingly, they will take their seats in the PLC on Saturday on the basis of elections pursuant to the Oslo Accords, participating in a Palestinian Authority that is part of that negotiating process.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Mr. Welch, for this interview.

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** I would like to ask only two questions in Arabic, please.

(In Arabic.)

**AMBASSADOR WELCH:** (In Arabic.)

**QUESTION:** (In Arabic.)

Thanks so much.

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