



THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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Interview of the President by AL Arabiya

The Library

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Q Mr. President, thank you very much for this interview. I much appreciate it.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

Q Let me start after the -- Mehlis report. You described the report as deeply disturbing. Does the United States, your administration, support imposing sanctions on Syria?

THE PRESIDENT: Here's what we support. We support that the world take this report very seriously, that there were some very strong implications in the report, that it be fully aired, and that the United Nations start to take action. Tomorrow there's a meeting of the perm reps, permanent representatives, and I've instructed Secretary Rice to call upon the United Nations to host a foreign ministers meeting as quickly as possible.

Q Are we heading into a confrontation with Syria?

THE PRESIDENT: I certainly hope not. I mean, I think one of the things that Syria has learned is that non-compliance with international demands will yield to isolation. 1559 was a very serious statement by the free world and the United Nations to say to Syria, get out of Lebanon, leave Lebanon alone, let the Lebanon democracy flourish and function. She saw -- she, being Syria -- saw that the world spoke in voice, one voice.

And nobody wants there to be a confrontation. On the other hand, there must be serious pressure applied so that the leader understands that, one, they can't house terrorist groups that will destroy the peace process with Israel and Palestine, for example; two, they should stop meddling in Lebanon; three, that they should stop allowing transit of bombers and killers into Iraq that are killing people that want there to be a democracy. In other words, there are some clear demands by the world. And this Mehlis report, as I say, had serious implications for Syria, and the Syrian government must take the demands of the free world very seriously.

Q The French -- as you know, the French Prime Minister wants to introduce a resolution for Syria to cooperate with the investigation. Would you support that?

THE PRESIDENT: The French foreign minister --

Q They want to introduce a resolution in the United Nations, in the Security Council, basically calling on Syria to cooperate further in the investigation into the killing --

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, I see. Sure. Well, listen, we're working very closely with the French. We did on 1559, and there was a clear message as a result of the cooperation between the U.S. government, the French, and many other governments -- and Condi Rice, who I spoke to today, is still in consultations with the French to make sure we have a common message.

Q I know you said before that you're focusing on diplomatic options, but the military one is still on the table. Would you resort to that?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, listen, nobody wants to use the military. A military is always the last choice of a President. I understand the use of military and I know how hard it can be, and I'm -- any time anybody loses their life in our military, I weep for the families. And I know innocent people can sometimes be in harm's way, so the military is always the last option. And this is a chance for the world to work together to achieve a diplomatic solution.

And our diplomats, starting with Secretary Rice, are working very hard to come up with a common position to make it clear to Syria that there are clear and understandable demands. And I've just listed some of them earlier. Listen, as you know, you and I have worked together and you've seen the emergence of a potential Palestinian state that I strongly embrace, but we must not allow terrorists to operate out of Syria that would derail the peace process. It's not fair to the people of Gaza; it's not fair to the people of the West Bank. And so that is one clear demand, that Syria must shut down these camps and not allow terrorists groups to have safe haven in Syria.

We want the Lebanese democracy to flourish. And so Syria should not be -- should no longer be involved in Lebanon. They removed their troops, like was told to them in 1559, but it also was clear it said, get rid of all your intelligence services and your -- and your operations out of there. And the Mehlis report implicates Syria's involvement in the death of Mr. Hariri, who was a fine man.

And, of course, one of the concerns I have and that other countries have, as well, is Syria becoming a transit place for these killers that are going into Iraq and killing Muslims, killing innocent women and children. And it's just -- they got to -- they got to understand there is a -- there's a worldwide concern about their failure to act.

Q If they don't cooperate, what would you do?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm hoping that they will. They did on 1559 in terms of getting their troops out. In other words, there's a diplomatic -- you're trying to get me to say something, I'm going to use our military. It is the last -- very last option. And no Commander-in-Chief likes to commit the military, and I don't. But on the other hand, you know -- and I've worked hard for diplomacy and will continue to work the diplomatic angle on this issue.

Q We've seen similar models before. Some people talk about the Libyan model, i.e. sanction, long-term, and then the Libyans will hand over the suspects -- or the Iraqi one --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think each country is different. Saddam Hussein had, gosh, a lot of resolutions out of the United Nations. Year after year after year after year, the United Nations said, do this, and he never complied. And so it's -- he was -- diplomacy wasn't working. And my attitude is, let's give diplomacy a chance to work. Obviously, we'd like to resolve any issue in a peaceful way. And that's

the main goal of the United States.

Q Obviously, you have the French and the British on board, but what about the Chinese and the Russians? Who will support -- will you get their support?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that's an interesting question. I think it's too early to tell. I certainly hope that people take a good look at the Mehlis report. Mr. Mehlis did a very thorough job, and it speaks -- there's clear implications about Syrians involvement in the death of a foreign leader. And the United States was willing to help, work with other countries, and we will, to make sure that out of the United Nations comes a clear message.

Q As you know, Saad Hariri, who's the son of the slain President, Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, is asking for an international court. Would the United States support the trial in an international court for the suspects?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we want people to be held to account. And I'd be glad to talk to other leaders to determine whether or not that's the best course of action. But certainly, people do need to be held to account. And the first course of action is to go the United Nations.

Q But further, would you --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we'll have to see --

Q -- support that or not?

THE PRESIDENT: We'll have to see.

Q If we move to Iraq.

THE PRESIDENT: Sure.

Q I would like to know, how would you evaluate the performance of Saddam Hussein during the trial? Do you think he's weakened? He's still defiant?

THE PRESIDENT: That's hard for me to tell. The key thing is that there will be a fair trial, which is something he didn't give many of the thousand people he killed. It's -- there's going to be a lot of international scrutiny. There will be a lot of press coverage. People are going to be watching very carefully. And what matters is the fact that he will be brought to trial in a fair way.

Q And do you think that, eventually, the situation is safe enough for this court to take place? Is Baghdad safe enough for Saddam to be tried there?

THE PRESIDENT: I think it is, yes, I do. I mean, listen, it's safe enough to have an election nationwide, where these killers were saying, we'll kill you if you vote, and a lot of people went and voted. In other words, it's possible to provide security. But I think the trial needs to go forward.

Q But, you know, Mr. President, one of the defense lawyers was killed --

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, I know. It's just terrible.

Q So how can you make sure it's fair trial --

THE PRESIDENT: No, I understand. Well, there will be a fair trial. The question is whether or not there's the courage to go ahead with the trial. And I think the people of Iraq would like to see Saddam Hussein tried for the crimes he committed.

Q Would you support again an international trial for him?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I didn't, I didn't at all. I think it's very important for the Iraqis to have a justice system that earns the confidence of the people. This is a new democracy, and part of a democracy is to have a fair judicial system. And I thought it was very important for the Iraqi -- citizens of Iraq to conduct the trial in such a way that it earned international respect.

Q You had started talks with the Sunni opposition parties. What happened to that? Where -- are you advancing in the talks with them?

THE PRESIDENT: With the Sunnis?

Q Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, the United States of America will not try to pick a winner in the upcoming election. We talked -- our Ambassador Zal Khalilzad was involved with trying to help the parties come together and make a deal on the constitution, to get people's participation and get people involved with the -- show that the process can work through discussion and compromise.

And when it comes to the elections, upcoming elections, should the constitution get passed -- and it looks like it might, there will be an election for a permanent government -- the United States will not pick a winner. That's going to be up to the Iraqi people. Our mission will be to encourage all people to participate in the process.

It's been amazing, what's happened in Iraq, when you really think about it. Millions of people voted last January. Nobody -- a lot of people didn't think that would happen. And then this new constitution was written. You know, it's a document that is -- it caused a lot of debate, and people showed anxieties or supported part of it, but it's a document that can be changed with a democratically elected government, just like what happened to our Constitution. I mean, the United States Constitution created a lot of anxiety when it was first passed, and then it was amended right off the bat. But I'm very -- I've got to tell you, I am impressed by the courage of the Iraqi citizens, and pleased with the progress.

Q Are you satisfied with the security situation? It's pretty dismal there.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's tough, but the security -- no question. And the enemy, these killers, have got one weapon, and that is to get on TV by killing innocent people. And it's a powerful weapon, don't get me wrong. And what they're trying to do is shake our will. They would like us to leave. They would like to take advantage of a weak situation, so they can begin to spread their dark vision of how they ought to -- want to rule countries and regions. They have hijacked a great religion. Islam is peace -- it's not war, it's not killing innocent children and innocent women.

And these -- Zawahiri, as you know, there was a letter to Zarqawi that came out, and it talked about his vision of driving America out of parts of the world, and overthrowing governments to be able to implement their vision of a society in which women don't have rights, or a society in which you can't

worship freely. And it's a society in which they can plan attacks on other people. And they've got one weapon. They don't have a philosophy. People don't say, gosh, I want to follow them because there's such a better tomorrow. And the only weapon they've got is to kill innocent people. And they're trying to shake our will.

And there's no question the images are terrible. Americans weep when they hear about the loss of life like that. On the other hand, the security situation is improving, when you look at the fact that they just had an election, and that -- we can't stop random acts of violence, but the Iraqi security forces are better prepared to defend themselves. And over time, they'll become even better. And as I told the American people, as the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down. And we're headed in that direction right now.

Q I have to go quickly to the Palestinian situation. First, Abu Mazen visit. I know this one is supposed to be primarily about the Palestinians. But would you support the outcome of the results -- as you know, you discussed this with Abu Mazen -- of the election, the Palestinian election in January, if Hamas wins, regardless?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you know, I told him that it's very difficult to have a -- first of all, it depends upon whether there was armed citizens. I mean, you can't have a political party that's, on the one hand, based on philosophy, on the other hand, based upon violence and use of force through arms. He understands that.

Let me step back, if I could. I was impressed by my visit with President Abbas. He's a courageous man. He told me some things that were very strong in terms of the development of democracy, which I appreciate, because, as you know, I've articulated the vision of a Palestinian state, a democracy, living side-by-side with Israel. And I think it can happen. And I know, first and foremost, it takes strong leadership.

And President Abbas showed me something in the Oval Office, which is, one, a deep desire to defeat terror and promote democracy. And he understands, as he said, that we can't have armed gangs, whether they be in a political party or not. They're destabilizing the situation. And so he's had one authority, one law, one gun policy. And I believe he means it.

Q Right. So you would like him to disarm the Hamas and Jihad before the election?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, as he said, what he's going to do is to make sure there's no armed presence on the streets, and I would like for him to follow through on that. I believe that his party will win because his party is one of peace. And I think most people want peace.

One of the interesting things is, in this campaign, is that he will be able to say, I worked with Israel to get Israelis out of Gaza. Now, had you and I been discussing this a year-and-a-half ago, because I know this is an issue very dear to your heart, and I would have said, the settlements will be dismantled and Israel will be out of Gaza, you would have looked at me and said, I don't think you know what you're talking about, Mr. President. And sure enough, it happened. Prime Minister Sharon gets a lot of credit for that, as does President Abbas.

Very few people thought it could -- this -- there could be enough cooperation for the withdrawal to be peaceful. Both men had to deal with difficult political situations as a result of the decision. And now we need to move forward, and the United States wants to help. And we want to help -- you asked me if -- if people get elected, they're going to use violence as a tool, there won't be our help. We just won't be involved. If people get elected who say, we want to advance peace and prosperity of the Palestinian

people, we'll be involved.

Q Finally, very final question.

THE PRESIDENT: No, you can keep going.

Q Thank you. When we talk about the Palestinian state, I know you are the first President -- you heard this many times before -- you are the first President to call for a Palestinian state. You don't like timetables. Why -- can you clarify what you say the other day -- why don't you want to push the parties towards a final status negotiation, and say, by this date, we're working towards it?

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely. I said -- I appreciate -- thank you for giving me the chance to clarify a statement. Look, I said I would like this to happen before I end being President. And I would. And we are going to push. I mean, one of the reasons -- well, Condi and I talk about this all the time, Condi Rice and I, about how we'd very much like to see a Palestinian democracy achieve its status as a state. I'd love that if I were the President. I think it would be a great historic achievement for everybody involved. And so I did put out a firm date, and I'm going to work hard for that date.

On the other hand, you don't want an American President making decisions for other people based upon his own political calendar, or his own time in office, is what I really meant to say. I don't think it's fair. And this is going to be a process, as you know, that will be two steps forward and one step back, and two steps forward. And the United States is fully committed to the road map, we're fully committed to helping going forward, and we're fully committed to practical things on the ground.

You know, I had General Ward in the other day. And as I told you at the press conference, we're going to replace General Ward soon, and I meant that. There needs to be continued help of -- to help President Abbas be able to deal with the security situation. One authority, one law, one gun -- in order to have one authority, one law, one gun, you got to have -- got to reform forces that are able to respond.

Secondly, I talk to Jim Wolfensohn a lot. Now, there's a practical man. And the greenhouse is a good example of practical application of U.S. desire to help get the economy going.

Look, I fully understand the Rafah crossing needs to be opened, and I think it will be, sooner rather than later, and we're pushing hard. But there's other crossings that need to happen. There needs to be -- in order for the Palestinian economy to grow, there needs to be -- there needs to be crossings in -- yes, in northern Gaza, in Israel, so people can go and work and come back and bring enterprise. Israeli capital needs to take a look at enterprise zones within the Gaza so that there's a chance for people to find work. Foreign capital needs to be encouraged to go into Gaza so that the -- so that good Palestinians can work.

Let me tell you something about what I know. First of all, I've been very impressed by the caliber of the Palestinians I've met, and I've met quite a few. They're very smart, very well educated, and very entrepreneurial. The Palestinians are good businesspeople. And they want to be free. And they're peaceful, they really are peaceful. And they have a chance to -- and I've told this to Abu Mazen; I said, you've got a fantastic population, let's -- now is your chance to lead them.

As you know, I welcomed some of his young team.

Q I know about that meeting.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, we had the chief of staff, and his spokesperson is a lovely lady who is a very

well-educated person, went back to the -- to Palestine to try to serve what she hopes will be a country. I was impressed by these young, dynamic, capable, peace-loving people.

And so I think we've got a very good chance to succeed. I want it to happen before I'm President, but it's not about me. That's my point. It's about the Palestinians, and it's about the Israelis, all of whom want to -- many of whom want to get rid of the past and have a more glorious future by living side-by-side in peace and democracy. And it's -- I think it's going to happen

Q I hope so. Thank you very much, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Thanks.

Q Thank you for your time. Thank you. Wonderful.

THE PRESIDENT: Very good interview.

Q Well, one day I'm going to run as the mayor of Gaza, so probably I need your help. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely. After I'm President I'll go help you. (Laughter.)

Q Thank you, sir.

END 3:58 P.M. EDT