

Interview of the President Bush by Nadia Bilbassy-Charters, Al Arabiya TV

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The Lebanese democracy is essential to a peaceful Middle East

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Q Mr. President, thank you very much for your time, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: I am honored to be with you again. Thank you.

Q Thank you. And of course we're going to focus on Lebanon. You have been a strong supporter of Prime Minister Siniora. Yet when he came under attack, he seems to be abandoned -- not the U.S., not the U.N., not Arab countries came to his aid. How do you explain that?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't think it's an accurate description that the United States hasn't stayed in contact with him, has listened to him, has listened to his requests. I mean, we're in contact with him a lot. And the reason why is because I personally admire Prime Minister Siniora, and the Lebanese democracy is essential to a peaceful Middle East in many ways. And so we're -- we will help him. We'll help him particularly and primarily through strengthening his armed forces, the Lebanese armed forces. It's probably the most practical way that we can get some help to him quickly.

Q Just to follow up on that, during the fight with Fatah al-Islam, you have helped the Lebanese army, but in this particular case, it doesn't seem to be coming. So can you just give us some details --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, we probably got some more work to do, Nadia. I mean, we've got -- it's interesting, the situation has evolved from one where Hezbollah supposedly was protecting the Lebanese people from Israel; now we're going to need -- inherent in your question is a desire for the Lebanese armed forces to protect the Lebanese people from Hezbollah. And the roles are seemingly reversed. And so Condi, in particular, has been in touch -- Condi Rice has been in touch with the Prime Minister a lot to assess needs and to help and see how we can help.

Q Three of your closest allies, which is Saad al-Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, and Prime Minister Siniora, are under siege, they're under house arrest. Is this any guarantee that you -- their life is safe or that they're not going to be attacked? And if they are attacked, what the United States can do?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we're constantly looking at options, of course. And we're monitoring the situation very closely by staying in touch with these leaders, particularly Prime Minister Siniora. And the best solution is for the Lebanese armed forces to be -- is to be capable of protecting the leaders. And that's what we expect. And our Ambassador evidently was in with the Prime Minister when he gave instructions to the military to protect these leaders.

The Lebanese armed force is pretty good. They're not great yet, but they're pretty good. And we want to make them better so that they can respond.

Q But you're confident that their safety is not going to be touched?

THE PRESIDENT: I hope so. I'm not confident -- I was hopeful that Hezbollah would become patriotic, patriots to Lebanon, and not respond every time to Syrian or Iranian demands. And so we'll see what happens. As you know, there's been a lot of confusing stories coming out, but one thing that we're concerned about is obviously the safety of our friends and leaders.

Q One other thing we have seen was the USS Cole has moved from the Suez Canal opposite the Lebanese shores. Is this just a show of force or are they able to do something?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, this is a part of a routine training mission that had been scheduled a long time before. Again, I repeat to you, the best way for us to help stabilize the situation and eventually allow this Lebanese democracy to go forward is, one, keep the pressure on Syria; and two, bolster the capabilities of the Lebanese armed forces so that they respond to the government and the government says, okay, you need to go protect these people, or go take care of business here, they'll be able to do so.

Q So you're satisfied with their role so far?

THE PRESIDENT: Satisfied with?

Q The army.

THE PRESIDENT: No, I'm not satisfied with the army, but I'm satisfied that, given their equipment, they've done a good job. And the question then is, can we help them get better equipment and better training in the short run. In other words, we want it to be better than today. I was satisfied with the earlier incursion that you talked about. I thought they handled themselves very well.

Q You wanted to meet with Prime Minister Siniora in Sharm el Sheikh, but he's under siege. How he's going to get out of Lebanon?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know, we'll see. I'd like to meet him. And we'll just have to deal with that when I get over there.

Q Is there any plans?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I haven't -- there may be, I just haven't talked to anybody about it today, Nadia, in terms of -- you know, I'd love to see him. I think it would be a good message if I could see him and stand with him, side by side, and say the truth, which is, I admire his courage. And I think the Arab world needs to support him stronger, and I think the Arab world needs to make it clear to the Iranians and Syrians that allow this good man to govern his country without interference.

Q Sir, a former Israeli army -- (inaudible) -- said that it's better if Hezbollah is in control of Lebanon. It will make it easier for Israel to attack. Do you agree with this man?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm a peace man. I think -- I don't know who this guy is and I haven't read about it, but I will tell you that I would much rather have the Siniora government succeed and survive, and that there be peaceful -- a peaceful process. I think we ought to all work to prevent the necessity for armed conflict in order to solve problems. Obviously, look, I believe that using the military as a last option is important to keep on the table. But I would hope that we -- through better policy that we would create the conditions -- that we would not create the conditions that would enable another war inside Lebanon. These people have suffered too long. So have the Palestinians, by the way, and that's why I'm for a Palestinian state.

Q Well, we're going to -- on the Palestinian issue in a minute, but do you see what's happening in Lebanon as a proxy war between Iran and the U.S., fought this time on Lebanese territory?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that it's a part of a larger ideological struggle where people are willing to use agents of violence in order to achieve their political objectives. And so whether it be Lebanon, Iraq, or the Palestinian Territories, you're seeing this type of strategy play out, and a lot of it is fueled by Iran.

Q What measures would you take to pressurize Syria or Iran regarding the action of Hezbollah in Lebanon?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we're taking pressures, as you know, through sanctions, which sometimes are effective, sometimes aren't. And what's very important during this period, Nadia, is to remind people of the truth and the realities on the ground, to encourage them to be more tough on implementing these U.N. Security Council resolutions.

And obviously we're trying to solve problems diplomatically. I mean, it's important that we work with friends and allies to see if we can't convince the Iranians to stop funneling monies to these violent groups, or to stop their enrichment -- suspend their enrichment activities; on Syria's case, to put financial pressure on them to adhere to the U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding Lebanon.

And we've been successful sometimes, as I mentioned, and sometimes we haven't, because sometimes commercial interests don't take the threats nearly as seriously as you do or I do. And so it's just a lot of work to keep the pressure, but to me that's the best way to try to solve these problems, is through diplomacy.

Q There is no selective military strike that could be considered?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, there's always -- as you know, there's always that option. I made it very clear during my presidency: that option is on the table. And of course -- and I've also always said diplomacy is our first choice.

Q Some would say that Iran is establishing a foothold in the Mediterranean, whether it's happening in Lebanon now, and this issue of Gaza, to a certain extent, by Hamas. How would you kind of react to Iranian influence in the region?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's clearly there, and the first thing is to tell the truth. That's why I'm glad you're asking me about this question, because I want people who are listening to understand that it's the Iranian influence that is creating problems for the Palestinians trying to have a state. I mean, isn't it interesting that there's a two-state solution on the table that needs to be negotiated -- I readily understand that, that you can negotiate the boundaries, negotiate the refugee issue, negotiate the other issues -- but as those negotiations go forward, there are Iranian-backed groups trying to kill people to stop it, trying to create enough violence and confusion so that the peace talks don't go forward.

And it's just a clear example of why the Iranian influence needs to be dealt with. And the United States is very much involved with doing that, through, for example, success in Iraq. And we're trying to stand with our friend -- not trying -- we are standing with our friend, Siniora. We're analyzing ways that we can continue to do so. And I'm going to the Middle East to talk very clearly about the Palestinian state and how I'd like to get it defined before I leave office. And I think we can. I think we can.

Q But the fact that you don't have a trilateral meeting between yourself, Abbas and Olmert --

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think --

Q -- as some would say it's like --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I know, but don't read into that. I mean, it's -- look, I think I can be plenty effective, meeting with these leaders. And remember, Condi is over there meeting -- the main negotiators, by the way, happen to be Tzipi and Abu Ala, and they're talking all the time, and we're trying to get their data, where they are, and bring it to the leadership level at times; and the leaders are meeting, as well. So it's a very complicated process, and I don't think necessarily not having a trilateral meeting should be read as anything other than that it just didn't work out. It's not a sign that the talks aren't going forward.

Q My time is over. But can I -- do I, can I --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, fire away. Of course you can.

Q Thank you, sir. You know, I mean, some will say that you were the first President to call for a Palestinian state, yet people do not see tangible results on the ground. You're going now in a very tough time. Prime Minister Olmert is facing corruption charges. You're celebrating 60 years of Israel independence; for the Palestinians, 60 years of misery. What can we offer, tangibly, on the ground, to the Palestinians that will say, George Bush did this for us?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I appreciate that very much. One is a security force that can respond to the -- Prime Minister Fayyad's work and President Abbas's desires. I mean, it's -- in other words, people want to see whether or not the state is capable of protecting them. And therefore, as this Palestinian force gets more capable, we expect the Israelis to move back, and move back to the point where the state can actually begin to function a little bit in the West Bank.

Secondly, economic development. I mean, people are wondering, okay, it's great, Bush shows up, he talks about a Palestinian state, but where are the tangible benefits? And so the idea of working these entrepreneurial programs, or some of these programs that my friend Tony Blair is doing -- who I will meet with, by the way -- just to get a sense for how we can advance them.

But I fully understand your question, and your question is, all we hear is talk; when are we going to see action? Well, part of the plan is for people to see a better life. And the other part of the plan is for there to be a clearly defined state so it's no longer just a two-state solution; it's "here's what the borders will look like, here's how we're going to deal with the refugees, here's how we're going to deal with the different, complicated issues," so people could actually see and analyze, do I want this, or do I want what's happening in Gaza, for example? And given that choice, I'm confident, having met a lot of Palestinians and know the Palestinians fairly well, about how people just want peace. They want their children to grow up in peace and they want to be able to make a living.

Look, the Palestinians are very entrepreneurial people. They know how to make a good living, and that's all they want. And moms want their kids to go to schools, and without fear of violence and fear of poverty and fear of disease. And believe me, I understand that there needs to be a lot of work, but from my perspective, the definition, a clear definition of

a state would be a major step forward of providing hope, and a different vision, a different way forward.

Q So an agreement still can be reached by the time you leave office?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I think so. That's what I'm aiming for, absolutely. We're pushing hard.

Q Just on the Saudis -- also, you're visiting Saudi Arabia --

THE PRESIDENT: I am going to go to Saudi. See, I'm going to go to Israel, but I'm also going to two other important stops, which is Saudi Arabia, as well as Egypt.

Q And what do you hope to achieve in your visit with the Saudis?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, His Majesty, it's always a pleasure to be in his company. He's a dear friend of mine, and he has kindly invited me back to his farm, which is a great --it's an honor. And we'll talk about a lot of bilateral relations, visas and different relations. And of course, he'll be very interested in a lot of other subjects, too. He'll be interested in knowing about progress in the Palestinian issue, he'll be --

Q Iraq? THE PRESIDENT: Yes, Iraq. He'll be interested in Iran. He'll be interested in a lot of issues. And I'm looking forward to briefing him in person.

Q Right. And the price of oil, would you raise it with him?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. I mean, I raise it with him every time I see him, and it's gotten higher. And -- yes, of course, I will. It's -- the interesting thing for people to understand, though, is that there's not a lot of excess capacity in the world now. Demand has risen so fast relative to supply that it's very tight. And there is no easy solution. It took us a while to get to where we are, and it's going to take us a while to get out of where we are.

Q Finally, what would be your advice to the next President regarding the Middle East?

THE PRESIDENT: Take the Middle East seriously because that's the center of -- that's the place where people get so dependent and despair that they're willing to come and take lives of U.S. citizens.

On the other hand, be hopeful because the Middle East is full of really decent, honorable people that want to live in peace. And use our influence to promote peace, whether it would be in Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, or elsewhere.

Q Thank you very much.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, ma'am.

Q Thank you for your time. Thank you.

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