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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld

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Television Interview with Secretary Rumsfeld and Talal Al-Haj on Al Arabiya

AL ARABIYA: Mr. Rumsfeld, thank you sir for this privilege. We do appreciate it.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Thank you. I'm delighted to be with you.

AL ARABIYA: Short of a U.S. style democracy in Iraq, sir, what does it take to disengage?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: First of all I don't think there will ever be a U.S. style democracy in Iraq. I think there will be an Iraqi democracy, as there should. A representative system that's respectful of its people, at peace with its neighbors, and that will be a good thing. It will be a good thing for the Iraqi people and it will be a good thing for the region. The entire region will benefit from a successful, prosperous, peaceful Iraq.

The Iraqi people deserve that. They've had a difficult time. They have a proud history and I look forward to the day that that will happen.

What will it take? It will take the Iraqi people responding to the 10 or 12 million Iraqis who went out and voted, and fashioning a government that is representative of the country. I think that's going to happen soon and I look forward to that. It's up to the Iraqis to decide what that will look like and who the people will be, but we wish them well.

We now have trained and equipped something like 250,000 Iraqi security forces, and almost every week we're turning over bases to the Iraqis, we're turning over real estate that they now are in charge of. Our goal is to not be in Iraq. Our goal is to have the Iraqis manage the situation in Iraq.

AL ARABIYA: When do you feel the moment has arrived for you to say thank you so much and we're going home?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well, we'd like it to be as soon as possible, needless to say. And I think that's something we would discuss with the new Iraqi government and make sure that it was managed in a way

that was appropriate from their standpoint and did not inject instability into the situation. A lot of people's lives have been invested in that country, a lot of money has been invested. We want to turn it over to the Iraqi people and have them manage their own affairs, but it's the kind of thing that would take conditions on the ground to enable that to happen. When the new government is formed we would set up some committees to start talking with them about what pieces of the responsibility they could continue to take over and at what pace.

AL ARABIYA: Talking about the American forces in Iraq. According to a Zogby International poll in February, 29 percent of the soldiers would prefer an immediately withdrawal; 50 percent would favor a pullout in six months. People on the Hill speaking to us, they would like you to have an extensive withdrawal this summer to help them out, some of them, Republican [inaudible] election [inaudible], but they understood what they told us.

Do you have plans for an extensive withdrawal this summer? A redeployment of forces in Iraq?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well I personally don't give any credence to that poll. I would think 100 percent of our forces would prefer to be home. Their goal is to not be there, and that's perfectly understandable.

It seems to me that any President or any leadership that chases public opinion polls is not going to succeed.

AL ARABIYA: But these are Republican senators and congressmen.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I understand that. There have always been differences over wars and big issues like this. This is important. I think it's important for the people of the region to reflect on what the world would look like if we turned Iraqi over to Zarqawi and to the terrorists, and to the people who behead people on television, the people who indiscriminately go out and kill 40, 50, 60 innocent men, women and children of Iraqis. They're basically trying to, by their violence, the insurgents and the terrorists, by their violence they're trying to frighten people and to terrorize them, to alter their behavior.

If we simply throw in the towel and say fine, you have it Zarqawi, you have it bin Laden, this world would not be a good place, because they won't be satisfied with that. They'll go after the neighboring countries next. And their goal is to reestablish a violent regime in that part of the world and they're not going to succeed, I don't believe.

AL ARABIYA: President Mubarak of Egypt, many Iraqi leaders including ex-Prime Minister Allawi said what's going on in Iraq now is civil war. What is the difference between a civil war and what's happening in Iraq now?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: If you go to civil wars historically and look at them in different countries around the globe, they have existed in time. We've had one in the United States that was a violent one, lasted many years.

I'm not going to get into the debate as to semantics as to what is or is not a civil war. People can call

whatever they want what's going on there. I personally think of it as a situation where in 18 provinces of the country about 14 are at peace. There are very few incidents of violence in 14 of the provinces.

AL ARABIYA: But the majority of the population live in the other four, sir.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: And the population, Baghdad is the place where the bulk of the violence is, and then in three others.

AL ARABIYA: Yes, sir.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Now, what does that mean? Some of it is criminal violence. Some of it's Zarqawi and al-Qaida violence. Some of it is insurgent and sectarian violence. And it is a mixture of things. And I think that if someone wants to put a label on that they can, but I think of it as terrorism myself.

AL ARABIYA: Would the American forces be able to continue to stay in Iraq if the situation of a full-fledged civil war took hold of the country?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I'm not going to get into that. I don't think a full-fledged civil war will take hold of the country myself. I think the Iraqi people --

You know, the terrorists tried to stop the election that took place a year ago January. They failed. They tried to prevent the drafting of a constitution by the Iraqi people. They failed. They tried to prevent the referendum on the Iraqi constitution and they failed. They tried to stop the elections December 15th of last year and they failed. They're now trying to stop the formation of a new government and they're going to fail again. The Iraqi people have voted with their hearts and their courage and their feet and they've said they want to have that constitution and they want to have an elected government and I think they're going to have one.

AL ARABIYA: Sir, there is no doubt that sectarian strife is increasing, that there are people moving from areas to areas especially in the Shia and Sunni areas. How do you rate the performance of the Iraqi security forces? Your forces have already come back to Baghdad, I understand. Is that a statement on the readiness and the performance of the Iraqi forces?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: The performance of the Iraqi security forces has to be characterized in two pieces. The Ministry of Defense forces have been performing very well. We have our people embedded with them. We're able to see where their strengths and weaknesses are and correct them and give them additional equipment if that's appropriate, tell them where leadership needs to be improved, assist with logistics, assist with intelligence and the like.

The Ministry of Interior security forces, the police, have a different pattern. They're recruited locally. We were not training them. We have not had people embedded with them, and we have less visibility. They're at least a year or two behind the Ministry of Defense forces.

But in the aggregate the reality is that the Iraqis have provided security for the last election, for the

constitutional referendum, they're doing a very good job overall.

AL ARABIYA: General Batiste said that the fact that there was not enough troops actually created Abu Ghraib because putting incompetent officers in charge. Do you agree with that statement?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: No, I wouldn't. There are people who have different views on that, but General Tom Franks and General Abizaid and General Casey have been the ones who have determined how many troops there would be. They've made those recommendations to me and to the President and we've agreed with them. There's a balance that's needed in this.

You can have not enough troops, in which case things can be disorderly, or you can have too many troops and be too intrusive. Too much of an occupying force create a dependent on the people of Iraq so that they're depending on us, and actually feed the insurgency because no country wants to have foreign forces in their country over a long period of time. So it's a balance. It's an art, not a science. No one knows for sure what the right number should be. Everyone can have their opinion and express their opinion personally. I'll go with General Abizaid and General Casey's judgment. I think they're probably the best observers. There are people on the outside who are retired, who look back and say oh this or that, and that's fine. They can do that, but it doesn't make them right.

AL ARABIYA: Sir, you took full responsibility for the atrocities that took place in Abu Ghraib. You offered your resignation more than once, sir. You are a man of honor. Would you take this opportunity to apologize for the Iraqi people for what took place in Abu Ghraib?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Oh, we've done that, and there's no question but that people in the United States military, in Abu Ghraib on that night shift mistreated Iraqi prisoners. They should not have done it. They have been court martialed. They are being punished. There are some people serving in prison.

AL ARABIYA: Seven of them, sir.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: And it's something that should not have happened, it did happen, and we regret it deeply.

AL ARABIYA: Thank you. The future bases in Iraq, sir. There are some who say that you are planning to have future bases in Iraq in consultation, of course, with the Iraqi government. Do you plan actually to extend that?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: We really don't. It's up to the Iraqi government. Whatever the Iraqi government decides at some point down the road when there's a permanent government that's been elected by the people under the new constitution, they can decide how we can be helpful.

Needless to say we have been a big help to them in terms of training and equipping their military. Their security forces are basically oriented to deal with the problem inside the country. We've not gotten into any discussions with them about the future at all, and it would be the kind of thing that would be down the road if

they come to us and say they'd like to talk about that.

AL ARABIYA: And you would be accommodating?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I don't know that. We'd be happy to talk to them. I don't know if we'd be accommodating to what they want. But certainly it's their country and they're a sovereign nation and they're going to have to decide what they want and we wish them well.

AL ARABIYA: So after three years of Saddam's fall, according to your figures you lost 2,343 deaths this month, a release, more than 16,000 wounded. Iraqi figures are not so well documented, but people put more than 100,000 killed.

Did you expect this when you were planning for the war in Iraq? These sort of numbers? Did you anticipate it?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: You know, everyone who has tried to estimate what the length of a war would be, what the cost of a war would be, and what the casualty figures would be have consistently been wrong historically.

AL ARABIYA: Were you wrong, sir?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I made a conscious point of not predicting. I did not know. I do not know now. I know I don't know. I don't pretend to know. And I think people who think they know and have a high degree of certainty about how long it lasts or what the dollar cost will be or what the cost in human treasure will be, as I say, are almost always wrong and therefore listening to them is probably not worth one's time.

AL ARABIYA: Are you in a position sir, to comment on the Iranian enrichment announcement?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: No.

AL ARABIYA: You're not?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: No.

AL ARABIYA: Okay.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: The President has spoken on it, the Secretary of State has. We're obviously, the position of the United States and Western Europe and I believe Russia and China, the major countries in the world, have felt that it is not in the world's interest for them to move forward with a nuclear weapons program. They've said so publicly. They're on a diplomatic track to try to persuade the people there that that's in their best interest. It's a matter for the President to address, which he has.

AL ARABIYA: What do you think of the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: He clearly has expressed some extreme views that I have trouble believing are the dominant views of the people of Iran.

I think that the people of Iran are proud. They have a proud history. It's a large, important country. I don't think their choice is to be isolated from the rest of the world. And to the extent government leadership's words have the effect of isolating that country from the world my guess is they will not meet with the approval, the government leaders will not meet with the approval of the Iranian people overall.

AL ARABIYA: I will not ask you, sir, about the options that you have on the table. I will not ask you about Seymour Hersch's article because he will just go to Disneyland or Fantasyland, as you say.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: [Laughter].

AL ARABIYA: But I would ask you. Is there a nuclear option on the table or off the table?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: The more anyone discusses this the more misinformation gets communicated. The President has spoken on this repeatedly. There is no need for people who work for the President to rephrase anything he has said. He has said it all and I'll leave it with him.

AL ARABIYA: Okay. The diplomatic path is being followed, but are options still on the table?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: The President has spoken on this repeatedly and if I repeat his words it becomes newsworthy and I have no desire to be newsworthy on this subject.

AL ARABIYA: What would you consider as the Minister of Defense the no return point where you feel that the United States has to act with Iran?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: The Secretary of Defense of the United States does not make those kinds of --

AL ARABIYA: Recommendation?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: No. Those are issues for the President, for the Congress, for the United Nations, and that's the locations that that type of a discussion would take place.

AL ARABIYA: Is the prevention doctrine still applies to Iran?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I haven't heard the President comment on that, but you should take your guidance from the White House on this subject.

AL ARABIYA: What do you see as the Minister of Defense the escalating military threats to the oil industry?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Oh, I'm not going to get into that. People can read the papers. They know who produces it and who uses it and they can make their own judgments.

AL ARABIYA: Do you take the oil industry and the prices of oil in different situations in your planning? Sir, did you plan?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well, I think those kinds of issues are things that the Department of Treasury and the White House and the economic side of the equation think about.

AL ARABIYA: The United Nations reports on Guantanamo, sir. I'm sure you've read them and commented earlier on it. It actually, it was very condemning. But why doesn't the United States government speed up the trials of these 500 or so prisoners in Guantanamo and deal with them instead of having reports being issued so finger-pointing towards the Administration?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: First let me correct your statement.

AL ARABIYA: Yes, sir.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: It was not a United Nations report. It was a couple of people from the United Nations who did not even go down there. And for them to then opine as to what they thought of what was going on there is really out of order, one would have to say.

How can people who have not been there -- let me go on. You've raised this and I'll respond.

AL ARABIYA: Yes, sir.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: The other people. The hundreds and hundreds of journalists, members of the Congress, members of the Senate, representatives from 20, 30, 40 countries have been down there. They've seen it. The treatment of the detainees in Guantanamo Bay is excellent. The medical care they're receiving, the food they're receiving, their treatment is excellent. And people who have never been there, to run around making the kinds of statements that were made I think is not a responsible approach.

AL ARABIYA: Why did you let them, sir, meet with, because they are saying, justifying this. They are not going there because you do not let them meet or allow them to meet with the prisoners.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: The answer, I'm told is, this is not a Department of Defense issue, it's a U.S. government issue, the official organization is the International Committee of the Red Cross. They go down there, they've had offices down there, they go down repeatedly. They are the people who have the responsibility for letting the world know what the treatment is like, and they do. To let any other group go down there, and then you have to open the floodgates and let everyone go down there.

We invited them down. They wanted to go down on their basis. We let the International Committee of the Red Cross do that, and they do, in my view, a job that is representative for the world of what the actual situation is.

AL ARABIYA: There have been calls from retired generals, sir, this is something I'm sure you face on a daily basis now, from Paul Eaton, Anthony Zinni, Gregory Newbold, John Batiste, for a clear, fresh, so-called in the Pentagon. How does this affect you? I mean I know it's comfort to possibly your enemies, but how it's personally to you, sir?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: There are, I don't know, what, 3,000, 4,000, 5,000, 6,000 generals -- active duty, retired. There are thousands of them. There are several who are not on active duty who have, not current, who have made comments. And that doesn't surprise me at all. In the middle of a war that people are going to disagree with this or have different opinions? We have different opinions inside this building all the time. We expect that.

AL ARABIYA: Is there anything, sir, for the last three years you would have liked to pull the clock back and do differently?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well, we certainly would have liked to have the, we would like to have had the 4th Infantry Division be able to come in through Turkey, and it would have had an effect on the Sunni area, Saddam Hussein's stronghold, earlier in the conflict and probably would have had a beneficial effect in reducing the size of the insurgency.

AL ARABIYA: My last question, sir, I have signals that I have to finish. My last note says you are the third longest serving Secretary of Defense.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: It that right?

AL ARABIYA: Yes, sir. And with all this being directed against you by some members of the retired generals, do you intend -- I know you work at the pleasure of the President, sir, and as you know, the pleasure of the President continues to the next election. Do you, Mr. Secretary, intend to serve the President until the next election?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I intend to serve the President at his pleasure. The fact that two or three or four retired people have different views, I respect their views, but obviously out of thousands and thousands of admirals and generals, if every time two or three people disagreed, we changed the Secretary of Defense of the United States, it would be like a merry go round around here.

AL ARABIYA: So by the next election you will be the longest serving Secretary of Defense, sir.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: That remains to be seen.

AL ARABIYA: Thank you, sir. We appreciate this. Thank you, sir.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I enjoyed it.

AL ARABIYA: Thank you, sir.

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