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KEYWORD SEARCH
[Subject Index](#)  BOOKMARK   ...

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You are in: [Bureaus/Offices Reporting Directly to the Secretary](#) > [Deputy Secretary of State](#) > [Former Deputy Secretaries of State](#) > [Former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage](#) > [Remarks](#) > [2004](#)

Interview with Saad Mohammad of Kuwait News Agency

Richard L. Armitage , Deputy Secretary of State

Washington, DC

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(3:00 p.m. EDT)

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Let me, before we do, we wish -- this is going to go out to wire services?

MR. MOHAMMAD: Yes.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: We wish all our readers in the Middle East Ramadan Mubarak.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Thank you. Ramadan Mubarak.

Mr. Secretary, let me start, frankly, that there was a good news that the conference will be held in Sharm el-Sheikh on Iraq.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yes.

MR. MOHAMMAD: So you -- what does the U.S. Administration basically expect from this conference?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, first of all, it was an idea of the Iraqi Interim Government. They wanted to have a conference in Egypt that would be comprised of the neighbors, first of all, and the G-8 and some of the larger institutions such as the Arab League, et cetera. And the idea is to get a more common view of the need for everyone to do everything they can to support the aspirations of the Iraqi people. Some of the neighbors are doing a fair job on the borders to keep them from being used by people who want to come in and commit jihad, and others are doing a less good job.

And so one of the things that we hope to come out of this will be a little better activity -- the Iraqis hope come out of it -- a little better activity to protect borders. Beyond that, I think the Interim Iraqi Government wants an opportunity to spell out their ideas for hopes and aspirations of the Iraqi people to the neighbors and to the international community to make the point that an Iraq who is open and democratic, and not a threat to the neighbors, is the new Iraq of the future.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Now, when you're talking about controlling the border, do you mean Syria?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Syria has made some efforts recently. I don't think they're sufficient, but they have made some efforts. I was thinking more along the lines of the Iranians.

MR. MOHAMMAD: The Iranians, they're not controlling the border?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Pardon me?

MR. MOHAMMAD: They're not controlling their border?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: They're not, as far as I can see.

MR. MOHAMMAD: And will Iran participate in the conference?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Iraq?

MR. MOHAMMAD: Iran.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: My understanding is they will be invited. I don't know if they've accepted, but they will be invited.

MR. MOHAMMAD: But you don't know if they are, they will --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I don't know. Maybe my colleagues do.

MR. ERELI: I don't think -- the invitations have not officially gone out yet.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yeah, my understanding is they will be invited, but I don't think I've seen anything where they've committed.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Mr. Secretary, will the issue of debt be raised in the conference?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I can't say. I've certainly raised it enough, as you've seen and you've probably reported on. We probably will raise it at the Paris Club. But I think that you could expect some mention of it because a country which is \$125 billion in debt is one whose credit rating is so bad they can't make use of the international

lending institutions to try to more rapidly bring the people of Iraq out of their misery. But it's -- I don't think it's going to be a major focus. But as I say, it's going to be up to the Iraqis. They're going to be running the show.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Going back to the debt issue, Mr. Secretary, --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yeah.

MR. MOHAMMAD: You said at a Senate hearing, I think a month ago or so --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: House. House hearing.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Yes, House hearing. And you said that, concerning the Gulf that the money is at 40, 40 billion, something like this, and was given to Iraq during the Iraq-Iran War and this money was provided as a grant. And you said, as a grant. And we heard that you saw some reactions coming from some Gulf countries, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and they said that Mr. Armitage was expressing his personal view. What do you say about it?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I say it was my view. That the fact is that most of the aid, not all of it, but most of the aid that was provided was during the time when all of us, particularly our friends in the Gulf, were feeling a great threat from Iran.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Right.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: And I believe it was given in the main to try to keep Iraq as a bulwark against Iran because at the time, you remember, the Iranians were in the Majnoun Islands, very close.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Right.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Some missiles had landed very near to Kuwait in some of the islands, as I recall.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Right.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: So it seemed to me that it was -- the countries of the Gulf were making an investment. And I'm unclear as to how much paperwork exists that indicates whether these were loans or grants. So I think we can both be right. I think Iraqis would say they were fighting to keep the Iranians from coming forward, and friends in the Gulf could say, no, we provided the money to help them, but we always assumed it would be paid back from an Iraq that does have oil revenues.

MR. MOHAMMAD: I see.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: But that was all -- obviously, that all went by the board when Kuwait was invaded.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Right. Going back to Iraq, Mr. Secretary, and you know that the elections will take place in January.

And do you see the elections taking place in January with the violence going on now in Fallujah and other parts of Iraq?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, violence is going on in Fallujah and other parts, as you correctly indicate, whether it's in parts of -- or to some extent in Al-Ramadi. In other areas, violence has not gone forward, such as Najaf, and Samara is in a somewhat better situation, and (inaudible) is in a better situation. So it's a mixed picture.

We have expected an increase both through Ramadan and more generally as we approach the elections because, if the elections are, as the Iraqi Interim Government wants, that is, free, fair and transparent, with having the participation of all Iraqis, then this will deal a very serious blow to the former regime elements and foreign fighters who want to disrupt this.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Now, we hear about elections. The Iraqi Government says they are committed to holding the elections and the U.S. Government says it's committed to see elections take place in general. But what form of election?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, that's something that the Iraqis are working out. They have, with an independent electoral commission, started to develop the rules and regulations --

MR. MOHAMMAD: And they have not yet?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: They have done some. I think they've got four or five out of twelve already promulgated.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Okay.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I can't remember the exact number. They have determined how people either sign up as a party, and how many signatures it takes to be a party; and then, as I understand it, the next thing that the independent electoral commission has to develop, with UN help, I think, is the criteria for having a party then listed on the ballot. And those are already understood and promulgated.

My understanding is that the education campaign about this election has started in and among the people. The sort of baseline lists are the public distribution food lists, and there are other papers available and forms available for Iraqis who were either in the diaspora or, for one reason or another, are not listed on the PDFs lists.

So I think things are moving forward. It's going to be hard. Prime Minister Allawi, here in Washington, acknowledged that, but he is set on doing it and we're set on doing our part to help him.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Going back to the Greater Middle East, Mr. Secretary --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: The Greater Middle East.

MR. MOHAMMAD: The Greater Middle East. And I do want to hear from you about the upcoming conference in Iraq, which I --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: In Morocco?

MR. MOHAMMAD: Morocco, right.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yeah. December --

MR. MOHAMMAD: December.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: 12th, I believe. Some time in early December.

MR. MOHAMMAD: I think Ambassador Burns is there.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yeah. Right.

MR. MOHAMMAD: As far as I know, that he is preparing. What is this conference going to be all about? What are they going to discuss? Today, there was announcement from the State Department that 17.5 million would be provided to nine countries, I believe, and --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, this is a follow-on to a meeting they had with 28 countries in New York.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Right.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: When the Secretary was up at the time of the UNGA. And I must say, we were very heartened by the participation of those countries. And Morocco agreed to have a follow-on conference. Meeting in New York was one thing, but meeting in the Middle East, in this case in the Maghreb, and trying to help and assist those countries which indigenously are moving forward in one area or another of reform or openness and transparency, getting rid of corruption and all those things, is very important to us.

One of the most meaningful things that happened in New York was a speaker who stood up, a businessman from the Middle East. I don't know if you've heard this story. He stood up and he said, we all know what the biggest problem we face is. Now, everyone in the audience had their own personal view. He said, I'll tell you what it is. It's unemployment. He said, this is the ticking time bomb in the Arab world. And it really kind of changed the direction of that conference.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Yeah, I see. Now, to the Middle East peace process, what happened to the roadmap?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Our view is quite clear: The roadmap is still the only map in town and the alternative is falling off a cliff.

MR. MOHAMMAD: If President Bush is reelected, will the Administration be committed to --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yes. Yes.

MR. MOHAMMAD: -- to making sure that that is --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I think Secretary Powell has made that clear.

MR. MOHAMMAD: But some Arab sides are blaming the Americans for not doing enough.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yeah, well, there's a lot of cynicism, and I understand that. Everybody has been searching for peace for a long time, thus far without much result. But everyone equally wants the United States, who's committed to this process, and our President is committed to it.

MR. MOHAMMAD: And some are saying that the roadmap is just witnessing a death.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Is what?

MR. MOHAMMAD: It is witnessing a death.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: A death?

MR. MOHAMMAD: Yes.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I noticed that this is, as I said, the only map in town. Prime Minister Sharon came out the other day and said the roadmap was something that he was still committed to. Certainly, our Palestinian friends still embrace it. But let's be fair. Right now, today, if Israel had the best intentions in the world to negotiate, with whom would they negotiate? With whom?

When you read the Palestinian press -- and I only read it through cables so I, and the translations -- the Palestinian press themselves are quite critical of their own leadership in terms of their inability to get their act together. So I really hope that the PA will be able to stand on their own feet and come together with Israel. A real ability to negotiate meaning will be a partner in the search for peace.

MR. MOHAMMAD: And would the U.S. Administration work harder to bring the Syrians and Israelis back to the negotiating table?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, we've spent a lot of time on the Palestinian track, as you know.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Right.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Our colleagues have been out there a lot. At several tense moments, Secretary Powell was able to moderate things quite a bit. We've had discussions in Damascus and our own relationship with Syria is not what we'd like it to be. We'd like it to be in better shape. There may be the beginning of signs that it will be. And if that's the case, then of course, we'd use our good offices as we could and as was convenient to both the Israelis

and Damascus.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Many Arab officials in the background, they say that the U.S. Administration is not doing enough to help the Syrian President.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: You know what? This is very interesting to me. Here's a Syria which is, in effect, occupying another country; a Syria which is, in effect, interfering in the internal affairs of another country of the Middle East, Lebanon; has been so judged as doing so by the international community. I reference the UN Security Council Resolution 1559. And so I think that our Arab friends who are so worried about that should spend a little time trying to get Syria to do what Syria should have done at the time of the Taif Accords: Leave Lebanon to the Lebanese.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Lebanon for Lebanese. That's right. But Bashar has said, according to many, that he was willing to open a new chapter of relations with the United States, but the U.S. Administration is not doing enough to help him out.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yes, on this, our relationship with Syria has been strained for some time. Secretary Powell has met with President Assad and recently met with Foreign Minister Shara at the time of the UNGA. Bill Burns has talked to President Assad not so long ago. We are willing to have a better relationship. Syria has to be more serious about her borders, be more serious about the whole question of terrorism, and I believe has to be serious and listen to the UN community about Lebanon.

That does not mean to say that we're not open to the possibilities. We are.

MR. MOHAMMAD: The formation of a new government or the designation --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Of Lebanon?

MR. MOHAMMAD: -- of a new prime minister today, is this another interference by Syria, would you say?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I'll let others judge that. I know what the Syrian -- excuse me -- what the Lebanese are saying. Our view is, when Prime Minister Hariri resigned and that resignation was accepted by President Lahud, that we ought to have a consultation that was in, among and between Lebanese only. And from what I understand of the new government, this looks as if it has a made-in-Damascus flavor to it. But I'm informed of that by sort of speculation in the Beirut press.

MR. MOHAMMAD: How serious is the U.S. Administration with Syria in terms of implementing Resolution 1559?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: We're very serious, but it's not only us. Look, the French and others co-sponsored that resolution. We're serious about it; we think the Syrians ought to be serious about it. The fact of the matter is, as I indicated before, our Saudi friends at the time of the Taif Accords had come to the same general conclusion that this was best for the area. And so I think, what, 14, 15 years after the Taif Accords, it's about time, time for the Syrians to remove themselves and let Lebanon be for the Lebanese.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Mr. Secretary, let me move to Iran, the nuclear issue. And apparently that the Europeans are, they've started talks with Iran and they have their own proposal. Now, does the United States accept this proposal, recognize this proposal?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: We consulted with them. The Europeans friends came here and we had a meeting of the political directors. We saw what they were suggesting. We are skeptical of it, but we'll be glad to have them go make their presentation. They were going to do it anyway. Come back and they've indicated they'll inform us and then we'll see if there's anything in it. I think we're skeptical, I think they're a little skeptical. But we have to await the results. Our view is quite clear: An Iran with a nuclear weapons program, and we do believe that they have a nuclear weapons program, a program that is destabilizing to the region and, indeed, to the world. And she shouldn't ought to be behaving that way.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Do you see Iran as an imminent threat to the Gulf region after the downfall of Saddam Hussein?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I was heavily involved in the Defense Department during the '80s, and I was spending the majority of my time with Kuwaiti and Saudi and Jordanian, many friends, and they were telling me constantly about the threat. Now, if they feel a threat, and they're the ones in the immediate neighborhood, then I think we should feel a threat.

We would like an Iran that was not a threat to our neighbors and had no hegemonistic attitudes. We do keep an eye on it. But as I say, we consult quite often with all our friends in the Gulf and we hear a lot about Iran.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Mr. Secretary, let me just go bilaterally to Kuwait and the U.S. here. Kuwait was designated as a non-NATO ally.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I was there. (Laughter.) I got to give some remarks. I was very proud.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Yeah.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I was only angry about the weather.

MR. MOHAMMAD: That's right, it was indoors.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: You remember it rained. But it was good; the rain was good in Kuwait.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Yeah. And Kuwait is in the process now of signing a treaty, I think --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yes.

MR. MOHAMMAD: What does this mean to Kuwait and what does it mean to the United States?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, it's part of the web of relationships. We feel very strongly about the need to

have a very strong, close relationship with Kuwait, and we feel that as a general matter it is reciprocated by our friends in Kuwait. This administration existed long before the Iraqis invaded, but after the blood and the sweat that the Kuwaitis and Americans and other coalition members shed to liberate Kuwait, it's really, I think, taken off. We desire this relationship to be as good and far-reaching and deep as possible, and as comfortable to Kuwait.

You know, the day we were over signing the major non-NATO ally agreement, there was a young man in the audience. I don't know if you noticed, but he was wearing a uniform. He was wearing the uniform of a West Point cadet. He was the son of the Foreign Minister. Now, that's the kind of in-depth relationship we want, and that shows, I think, our respect for the people of Kuwait.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Saudi Arabia. Is the United States pleased with the action the government is taking in terms of reforms, openness, cooperating in terms of (inaudible)?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, as you just saw my Secretary acknowledge that the first elections are going to be held in Saudi Arabia, then had some pretty strong comments about the fact that women should be allowed to vote as well.

We went through a rough time with the Saudis, then they went through a rough time because of terrorism and many lives were lost. Through those bombings, we've seen the Saudi Government not only wake up, but extend tremendous efforts to rip out terrorism, root and branch, from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We are very pleased with that counterterrorism partnership, very pleased.

MR. MOHAMMAD: And do you think they do enough?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: In the counterterrorism arena, I think all of us have to do more. But I must say, they --

MR. MOHAMMAD: And in terms of openness, as well?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: In what?

MR. MOHAMMAD: Openness, reforms.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Look, this is a question that the people of Saudi Arabia have to answer. We've had questions about religious freedoms, where Secretary Powell made some very direct comments about all Saudi citizens should be able to take part in the political process. But ultimately, what's important is not what's important to Rich Armitage, but what's important to the people of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They're going to have to make the decision on whether they're satisfied or not.

MR. MOHAMMAD: Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Thank you.

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2004/1147

 [BACK TO TOP](#)



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