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Interview with Mohamed Alami of Al Jazeera Television

Richard L. Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State

Washington, DC

November 19, 2004

(1:15 p.m. EST)

QUESTION: Hello, Mr. Secretary. Thank you so much. And as I said, we're really going to miss you here and thank you for all the opportunities you provide for us.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: We have a couple more months, so maybe (inaudible).

QUESTION: Thank you sir. You know, it turned out to be that the statement made by the Secretary, kind of premature, according to some sources. What's your take on it?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, according to my source, which is me, it's not premature. Look, there's not a big secret that Iran has been developing missiles. We've seen her test missiles and we had a chance to (inaudible) those missiles. It's always been the combination of a drive for nuclear weapons and missiles that has been a great concern for the United States.

QUESTION: But *The New York Times* (inaudible) eerie vision (inaudible) war with Iraq (inaudible). Are you concerned about this credibility stigma now?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, I'm not concerned about it. I know the same information the Secretary does, so I'm not -- it doesn't raise the level of my concern. And just by the way, appearing on *The New York Times* is no more authoritative than appearing on any other -- or appearing in any other forum, whether it's print or electronic.

QUESTION: Yeah, but (inaudible) --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Of course, and especially Al Jazeera. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Well, thank you much, sir. (Laughter.)

But the Secretary, he said -- there's almost the same scenario leading to the war. You know, there's a lot of (inaudible).

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I wouldn't worry about it. Now look, the EU-3 ministers have been working very hard to try to persuade the Iranians to suspend their program. I don't think there's any question that the EU-3 ministers (inaudible) and we must head it off for the good of Iran, for the good of the region, the good of the world. Don't draw conclusions about similar scenarios.

QUESTION: And why still the difference between the U.S. and the European approach? It seems that the Europeans are offering some incentives, where the U.S. is offering mainly threats.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I think my view would be that the incentives of the Europeans only work against the backdrop of the United States being strong and firm on this issue. In the vernacular, it's kind of a good cop/bad cop arrangement. If it works, we'll all have been successful. If it fails, we'll all fail.

QUESTION: But if it fails, if that's what -- do you think war is a credible, practical alternative?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, I don't think it is. (Inaudible.) But obviously, though, we've said that all options are always on the table. That's not (inaudible). We want this resolution by peaceful means. I think the whole world wants (inaudible).

QUESTION: Well, you know, I'm sure you heard about it, concern in our capitals that in new term for administration, the new capital, as the President said, means for some people new confrontation with Iran and others.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I don't think that's necessarily the case. Maybe some in Europe would have said that, but the President, right off the bat, said he's going to try to reach across the Atlantic and reconnect with our transatlantic partners. Some would have said, no, he'll continue, we'll continue to have difficult relations. No, I think the President is very competent. He's got a very great team that he's putting together. I think you'll see a very thoughtful (inaudible).

QUESTION: Well, especially about Iran, the Foreign Minister of Britain said that the war with Iran is out of the table completely.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Is out of the what?

QUESTION: Is out of the -- you know, it's not on the table -- it's not an option.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, the Foreign Secretary of Great Britain is a very great friend of ours, Jack

Straw, and he speaks with great precision and knows what he talks about. We always say no options are off the table. But war is obviously not an option that we want to consider if we can help it. We're not talking that way. We're talking about resolving this problem by diplomatic means. That's where our policy is leading us and that's where we're going to continue to go.

QUESTION: So why not (inaudible) offer some incentives? You will not (inaudible) the proposition?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: And you would suggest what?

QUESTION: Well, along what the Europeans are offering.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: What would you suggest?

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: What the Europeans are offering? We're not standing in their way. They may offer those. We're not trying to block them. That's fine. Let's see if it works.

QUESTION: I mean, should the Secretary meet with his Iranian counterpart at Sharm el-Sheikh?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, he will have, as we had in the past at the time of Bonn, the conference on Afghanistan, the opportunity in that group to sit and air his views, and certainly we'll hear the views of Iranians. Beyond that, I don't want to speculate.

QUESTION: Talking about Sharm el-Sheikh, what do you expect from that conference?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I think the conference itself, the neighbors conference, kind of gives you a hint. What we're trying to do is have the neighbors, particularly Syria and Iran, and to some extent Saudi Arabia, be much more attentive to their borders so as to stop (inaudible), and Baathists in the Syrian case, from traveling in and out of Iraq. I think beyond that, it's a very good sign for Iraq, the opportunity for the Iraqi Government, that the neighbors and the major organizations of the world, the OIC, the Arab League, the G-8, are all getting together. And it shows that there's a great deal of world support for the Iraqi people.

QUESTION: But, sir, since you mentioned the neighbors, don't you think that probably this administration needs probably different approach to their neighbors? (Inaudible) confrontations with Syria and with Iran now. I mean, it's not that good with Saudi Arabia, either.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, we've had a much better relationship with Saudi Arabia than we had about a year ago. They're fighting the same fight, the war against terror, that we are. They're a partner.

Regarding Syria, it's up to Syria. We presented Syria -- Secretary Powell himself and it was reiterated by Bill Burns recently -- the opportunity to choose two paths. They can have one leading to confrontation with the Iraqi people -- because that's what it is -- or they can have a better path, which will bring them into the life of the modern Middle East. And I hope

they choose the latter path, but they haven't made that decision yet.

QUESTION: Iraq. French President Jacques Chirac said in London yesterday that the war is spreading terrorism. Apparently you disagree with his assessment?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Obviously. Is spreading to where? I think because of vigilant efforts of the United States and our global partners that we are gaining some ground on the war on terrorism. But this war was started by others. There were plenty of cells all over the world in many countries, including our own. Unfortunately, too many countries, many in the Middle East, and far beyond, the Philippines, Indonesia, have felt the sting of terrorism. Some of it was there before Mr. Chirac made his comments, and yet we'll continue to fight it.

QUESTION: President Clinton said yesterday that in the library opening in Arkansas that you cannot pinhole your enemies, you cannot get all these terrorists wherever they are. You think probably this only military-police approach could be revised by this administration?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, no, no. We don't have any only military approach. President Clinton was dead right. Terrorism is not an army or a country. It's not like fighting those type of battles. You have to have a military component. You also have to have police and law enforcement component and a financial (inaudible) component.

But at its heart, terrorism is an idea and we have to fight that with a better idea. And we have a view that that better idea is to allow people to reach their own levels, to allow people to be educated, whether they're male or female, to spread democracy in a way that's comfortable for the nations of the region, have transparency with a lack of corruption. These are the ideas with which we'll actually defeat terrorism.

QUESTION: But you think these ideas probably not ultimately in some (inaudible) in Iraq on the ground (inaudible) in the -- in the public opinions, you know, there's a war in Fallujah, you are shooting the people.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I think that you should look at Iraq more carefully. If you were to ask me, are we winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people, I'd say in the north, yes, and in the south we're doing a pretty good job. It's in the so-called Sunni Triangle that there are differences of opinion. It's not 100 percent against the Iraqi Government. They are mixed opinions. We've seen opinion polls where Sunnis 70, 75 percent want to take part in elections.

So we're having a tough slog, but the people who really having it rough are the people of Iraq. We keep in the front of our minds that there will be a better day for all of them, and we're dedicated to that task. You've seen it in Fallujah today; after eliminating a nest of those insurgents, you see Iraqis and Americans and other coalition forces rebuilding immediately in Fallujah, trying to give it back to the people of Fallujah so they can live their lives peacefully.

QUESTION: Sir, you have been asked this question several times. Let me ask you again. What was wrong, what went wrong in Iraq?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: We've said many things. I think that clearly we underestimated the criminal nature of the society. The virulence of the insurgency was greater than we expected, so we -- it's not rocket science, what

went wrong. We recognize what went wrong and now we're correcting it and we're trying to stand up Iraqi troops much more quickly. Perhaps we underestimated the force of nationalism in Iraq.

QUESTION: While talking about this nationalism, some people are suggesting in the papers just recently that the U.S. will never be able to defeat the insurgency. It didn't do that in Vietnam, the French did not in Algeria, and there is definitely a need for another approach.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I think our friends at Al Jazeera (inaudible) to think about one thing in particular. This is an insurgency, but it's not like other insurgencies. These insurgents -- unlike Algeria, unlike Vietnam -- these insurgents don't offer anything positive. They only offer fear and hatred such as the hatred which provoked them to kill Margaret Hassan, a woman who dedicated 30 years of her life to helping Iraqis. So that's what makes this insurgency different and that's why this insurgency will be defeated. They're not offering the Iraqi people something positive.

QUESTION: And why, why do you think that a lot of people, not only in Iraq but all over the world, are not convinced, including the French president, as we just said?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, the French president will have to speak for himself. I think he's fearful that we'll be successful.

QUESTION: And why is that?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: He -- maybe he, since he's made the decision not to be involved in Iraq, maybe he thinks that we won't be successful. I don't want to go beyond that. But there are many people who are betting that we will be successful, and I'll tell you who they are. They're the young men and women of Iraq who line up outside police stations and army units to be recruited and trained so they can fight for Iraq. They are the people who are now participating in the Iraqi National Assembly who are right now full of ideas and energy as they try to develop their political (inaudible) for the end of January elections. So there are a lot of people in Iraq who are betting we will be successful.

QUESTION: And certainly some groups are already declaring that you are going forth for the elections, but the whole fight of Fallujah started (inaudible) elections in that town. Do you think elections should be postponed now?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, I don't. But I think that you should go back and review the tapes of the April activities in Fallujah and what happened -- your tapes of April -- and look at what just happened in the recent Fallujah fighting. The reactions of the people in the so-called Sunni Triangle were much more muted this time. They were fed up with having bad people do bad things from their location.

In April, all of the people of the region stood up in opposition to any military activity. This time, I think the reaction was quite different.

QUESTION: So are you still confident that elections will be held in January?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: The Iraqi Government still plans to do it. I spoke about a week and a half ago in

Iraq with the UN person responsible for these. He said they could be done and as the government still wants them done at the end of January; that's our policy and we support it.

QUESTION: And how about, sir, the (inaudible) the whole Middle East democracy, you know, that which started from Baghdad. Do you think (inaudible)?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: With the broader Middle East?

QUESTION: Yes.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I don't know. We're going to have a Forum for the Future in Rabat and it seems to me -- on the 11th of December -- I think it seems to me many countries in the region are keen to participate. I think they now have been convinced that our own views of the broader Middle East initiative is not something that we can impose or will impose. It's something that comes from the countries themselves, full of their own unique culture and characteristics. And as I say, it increases educational opportunities, it increases transparency and it diminishes corruption. These are all things that every country in the region wants. I don't think that's been damaged.

QUESTION: (Inaudible), you are working with the regimes that are the source for problem; (inaudible) lead to a solution.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, and if you're working with the regimes that are the source of the problems, that's probably the right place to be working. We should be working with these regimes to develop, from within, ways of governance and ways also of educating that are more congenial to the population. That seems very reasonable to me.

QUESTION: And do you have any concern, sir, probably because the fight against terrorism probably took, you know, more priority than the real demands for reforms in the Arab world?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: If I understand the question, you're suggesting that our needs for the war on terrorism will overcome --

QUESTION: You need more information from these regimes. You need more, you know, that -- you're not, you know, more forceful with them.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, it depends on which countries and which regimes you're talking about. Our relationship with every country in the Middle East is totally different from one to the other and we have a (inaudible) nuanced (inaudible) these countries. Some are supporting the war on terrorism 200 percent. Some are supporting 100 percent. Some weren't, such as Saudi Arabia, but now are because the people of Saudi Arabia have suffered. So things are changing. We're just trying to take advantage of that change for the general betterment of the region.

QUESTION: One of the biggest problems in the Middle East, as you know, sir, is the Palestinian-Israeli issue. Do you think it was a mistake for the Secretary not to attend Mr. Arafat's funeral?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, no, I don't think so. I think Bill Burns' attendance there in Cairo was perfectly sufficient. As you know, the Secretary is going to visit with Israeli and Palestinian officials right before the Sharm el-Sheikh conference. Now that Chairman Arafat has gone beyond, there appears to be a new hope for some solution.

I was very pleased and proud of our President when he, in his first press conference after reelection, said that he was going to redouble his efforts in the search for Middle East peace and the development of the roadmap. He said the same thing with Tony Blair when Mr. Blair came to town, so I think that for the first time in many, many months and many years, there's some enthusiasm.

QUESTION: And, sir, will you be talking to the British prime minister to ask for that?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I noted that in his first press conference, the President of the United States said that he was intending to put priority on this. When Mr. Blair came, I think he was putting some emphasis behind that. But, no, the President had already spoken on this.

QUESTION: Sir, (inaudible) the same thing, you know, that the Palestinian have to do things -- always demand from Palestinians anything, (inaudible) for the U.S. Government toward the Israeli Government (inaudible) expected from it.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I think we've made it very clear that the violence has to stop, the violence on both sides, the settlement activity has to stop. But clearly, we're not going to ultimately be successful in our search for peace unless settlements stop.

We want to take advantage of the Gaza disengagement to begin a process that gets us back onto the roadmap, begins a process which allows the Palestinians to again govern Palestinian land. So one can be critical in the past, but they're not privy to the tough conversations that we had with the Israelis in private. There's no need for them to be public.

QUESTION: And sir, do you think that -- there's some assumption that the Palestinian leadership would be more flexible than Yasser Arafat's leadership. Do you think that's a safe assumption?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I don't know that I'd use the term flexible, but I think some new leadership clearly will not be, hopefully, mired in the past. I've noticed that many Palestinian officials have spoken out recently saying that the second Intifadah was a complete failure. I mean, Abu Mazen even said it was an utter, complete failure. And so there seems to be the case, it seems to be the case that this is the right time to try to turn a chapter, not the page, and move on -- all three, the United States, Palestinians and our Israeli friends, and try to find a new hopeful future (inaudible).

QUESTION: Would you recommend what's your new envoy in the second term?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, that's a question for the President, but I think that's something that has to wait and see how much interest and how much excitement there is in both Israel and Palestine to take advantage of this new occasion. The Secretary will judge that. I don't think it's ripe for an envoy yet. The time is too -- it's too early, in my view.

QUESTION: Sudan -- do you think this agreement will work now this time?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Inshallah.

QUESTION: Inshallah.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: But I think it is to good we've got a UN Security Council Resolution 1574 that kind of gives us some momentum. The two sides have agreed to reach a resolution by the end of the year. The Darfur situation itself is slightly better. The loss of any life disturbs us, but we see that the humanitarian situation is slightly better, so we'll continue to push and we'll continue to fight for peace there as well.

QUESTION: Now the forgotten conflict, the Western Sahara. And do you see any hope for that conflict, in your opinion?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, we, you know, we talk to our Algerian friends about it. We talk to our friends in Morocco. It's a difficult area. But we support the territorial integrity of Morocco. But we do recognize that the people of the Western Sahara have expectations about their own future, so we'll continue to have these discussions with President Butaflika and with (inaudible) and we hope that Kofi Annan could appoint a new envoy with the stature of Jim Baker. I think that can help.

QUESTION: One personal question, sir. What was the biggest -- your biggest regret in these last four years now? What achievement (inaudible)?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I would have hoped to have had a resolution of Iraq before now, but it was not to be. But I have to say, to some extent, that's offset by the unbelievable event we witnessed in Afghanistan when over 70 percent of (inaudible) to vote, showed up, stood in lines, faced danger in order to vote for President Karzai or some other alternative.

So there are regrets, and I've made some mistakes, but this Administration has been successful in several places along the way. I think Afghanistan is something that really points to that.

QUESTION: Sort of like your biggest achievement, in your opinion?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I think that's for others to do and I think it's not a good idea to blow your own horn. Maybe I should say I survived.

QUESTION: Sir, well, I'm glad you did. Sir, but some people are saying around the world that you and your boss, Secretary of State, you are the only two voices of reason in this government. A lot of people are concerned because you are leaving. Do you think --

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I thank you very much for the high evaluation that those people seem to offer, but I can assure you and assure all those listening that the President and his team will be a cracker-jack team. They're very great. They're very reasonable, very responsible. The President feels he has a new mandate and I have no doubt that

it will be a positive one.

QUESTION: I know you are not going to say, but do you have any concern about the new appointments? The papers are saying just, you know, asking just for yes-men to be around him.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I think the most important thing for a man who is our only nationally elected leader is that he feels comfortable with the people with whom he associates and surrounds himself. And to the extent the President's comfortable, I'm happy for him. I'm happy for our country.

QUESTION: Well, that's the way it should be. Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, no. I enjoy it. I always enjoy talking to you.

QUESTION: Thank you so much, sir. What's your plans for the future and what's your biggest hope for the next four years? What would be (inaudible) next two or three issues (inaudible)?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, my own plans for the future, I'll remain in the Washington area. I'll start my business again and I'll be a frequent visitor to the Middle East and other places.

My biggest hope would be that we resolve the question of Israel and Palestine, finally being close in the late '90s, but at that time we couldn't Mr. Arafat to say yes. I hope we can get to a situation where both sides to the conflict can say yes.

QUESTION: Thank you so much and we wish you the best of luck. Thank you.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Thank you. You're terrific. I like you.

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