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## Interview With Voice of America Persian Service

### R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

London, United Kingdom

June 6, 2005

**QUESTION:** I first need to ask you about your testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May. You talked about the deficits of freedom in Iran. What are the U.S. concerns regarding the Iranian Government's policies?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Well, our concern is the Iranian Government is not allowing dissent; that the Iranian Government is not allowing what we perceive to be the interest of most Iranians, and that's for a free society. To give you an example, I think there are 1,014 people who applied to run for the Presidency in the June 17<sup>th</sup> elections, yet the Guardian Council decided on its own — a small group of people — that over 1,000 of the 1,014 would not be allowed to run because it didn't like their political stripes. And that to us is not anywhere close to a democratic standard.

So, our essential concern with Iran is that there is a freedom deficit, a human rights deficit. There are undue restrictions in the press; there are restrictions on political party formation. It's an inability of people to express themselves; it's certainly an inability of women to be free, as they are in many Muslim countries, to assert their own views. Kuwait has just given women the vote. Women serve in federal and city governments in Qatar and in Bahrain.

Iran needs to change with the times and Iran has not. And if you combine that with the fact the Iran is, in our estimation, the leading sponsor of terrorism in the world and of terrorist groups and is also seeking a nuclear weapons capability — those are three substantial problems concerning United States' relations with Iran, which are at the front of our agenda.

**QUESTION:** You talked about Iran's pursuit of nuclear — that the nuclear program, terrorism and also being a destabilizing in the region. Has Iran now made so far any strategic decision to abandon what the U.S. terms as an active nuclear weapons program?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** We don't believe so. Iran, as you know, misled the IAEA — the International Atomic Energy Agency — for 17 years about its nuclear research activities. And we very much support the efforts of the

European Union governments — Britain, France and Germany — to negotiate peacefully an end to Iran's nuclear ambitions. But we make the assumption that Iran is trying to produce, ultimately, fissile material and that, therefore, Iran is trying to develop a nuclear weapons capability.

And because of that, we believe it's very important that Iran not be allowed to convert uranium, or much less reprocess uranium, to engage in all the nuclear fuel cycle activities along the continuum. Now, I know this is a difficult issue for Iranians because Iranians, like everybody else, have pride in their country and we know that many Iranians have pride in the fact that Iran could build a nuclear power — or a peaceful nuclear energy facility.

The problem with that is that this particular Iranian government has not been straight with the international community. It has not told the truth and because of that, therefore, you have this enormous, now international, pressure on the Iranian government to cease and dismantle all of its nuclear fuel cycle activities. And we believe the EU-3 have a good chance at success. We support them diplomatically. We have said so publicly. We have also met the commitments we've made. The EU-3 said — asked the United States to allow Iran to apply for the World Trade Organization membership. We did that ten days ago. The EU-3 asked the U.S. to sell spare parts to Iranian civil airliners — we did that.

And so we believe we have met our commitments here. We now need to see if the Iranians do the same.

**QUESTION:** As far as terrorism is concerned and the support of the regime for Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas, there have been talks in the United States about being able to bring these three groups into a political dialogue. Now, how do you think that will affect — is that an incentive for the Iranian regime? From the point of view of the United States or —

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Well, we have to judge these groups and also the Iranian government on their actions, not on their promises. And the Iranian government still refuses to even accept the right of Israel to exist as a country and a nation state. And at a time when most of the world is supporting negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians for withdrawal from Gaza and for future peace, Iran is going in the opposite direction and it is supporting these terrorist groups — it's funding them. It is sometimes directing their operations. And these are terrorist groups that are killing — attacking and killing innocent civilians in Israel, as well as in Lebanon, and that's a very big problem.

And until Iran makes the strategic decision that it will stop its support for terrorism, there isn't going to be a lot of support to bring Iran into a normal relationship with most countries of the world, including my own country.

**QUESTION:** And how do you perceive the Iranian behavior or attitude in this ongoing negotiations with EU-3?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Well, we hope the Iranian government will agree with the EU-3, that the end result has to be — has to be the impossibility of a nuclear program for the Iranian government. But that's not always what we hear. Just before the last round of negotiations that the EU conducted in Geneva, nearly two weeks ago, there were lots of statements from Mr. Rafsanjani and others, saying that Iran had a right to nuclear power; that Iran should be judged as all other countries. The problem with that argument is that given the deception by the Iranian government with a major international organization that oversees nuclear matters, the International Atomic Energy Agency, there is a deficit of trust that most of us feel about Iran.

And so, they may say they have a right to develop this capability, but we think they've given up that right based on the fact that they have not told the truth, and based on the fact that there is still a widespread international suspicion that behind the veneer of a peaceful nuclear energy program lies the ambition to achieve a nuclear weapon status.

We don't believe that the world would be safer if the Iranian government had nuclear weapons. In fact, we think the reverse. And again, the prospects for movement in the peace negotiations are there. The prospects for progress in Lebanon are very bright, given the results of the first round of Lebanese elections. And this is a time when all countries of the region should be supporting the peaceful development of democracy in Lebanon. And certainly progress in the Middle East negotiations front.

But Iran seems to be reacting against both of those movements. And so Iran seems out of step with where most of the Arab world, and certainly Israel and the United States, Europe, want those two situations to turned ahead.

**QUESTION:** Secretary Rice announced that the U.S. was prepared to take tangible, practical steps in support of the EU-3 diplomatic track. What would those steps be? You've explained about WTO and also selling aircraft parts to Iran. Are there other tangible steps?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** We've taken those steps and that is we support — on the day after the Geneva talks, on May 26th, we supported — agreed to Iran's commencement of its World Trade Organization application. And we've agreed to sell spare parts. So we've met our responsibilities.

**QUESTION:** How do you foresee the upcoming June 17th Presidential elections in Iran? Do you think it will make a difference?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** It's hard to say. We don't have an official presence in Iran. Ironically, this is the most unique relationship I think we have in the world. We have no official contacts with the Iranian government and no American presence in the country.

So it's very difficult for us to predict what might happen in the Iranian elections. We hope the elections will be free and fair, but we fear, given the actions of the Guardian Council, the reverse. We fear that those Iranians who want to run for office — the vast majority will not be able to do so. The Iranian people who vote will be left with a very narrow margin of choice and that the people who really control this regime lie behind the government and those are — and that is the clerics. And they're the people who seemed to have the most power.

And it's a tragic situation because if you go back to 1997, you saw the hope in the streets of Tehran and the other Iranian cities, that there might be change, that there might be opening of the country, that there might be a democratic movement, the way there had been in so many other countries of the region, on the part of the vast of the majority of the population, the majority is under the age of 35. And yet those hopes were dashed by the status quo of the last several years. It's a shame to see that happen.

What we hope is that people will slowly become more free, to say what they want to say, to think what they want to think, to do what they want to do; that women won't be denied the elementary rights that women everywhere should have to be free in the world. And it's a shame to see such a great country and a great nation like Iran be subjected to such

disappointing governmental leadership.

**QUESTION:** So do you foresee the forthcoming changes in the U.S. relations with Iran?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** I don't for the foreseeable future. I think, unfortunately, you'll see a continuation of the non-relationship that we have. We have no official contacts. But American objectives remain constant. You know, we do have — the Congress of the United States has appropriated money to support democratization in Iran and we're working with nongovernmental organizations to that end. We still have a very active Iranian-American community in the United States, which contributed a lot to our country. And of course which desires change — democratic change in Iran. And we believe that the will of the vast majority of Iranians is to see the country change and be reformed and modernized and see the political system opened up. I don't know whether these elections will bring that because so many reformers have been denied the possibility to run in the elections. But we've got to hope that eventually is going to be the future for the Iranian people.

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