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Interview With Jonathan Beale of the BBC

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

Washington, DC

June 17, 2005

QUESTION: This is an interview with Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary of State. If I can, first of all, ask you -- the Secretary of State's visit to the Middle East -- a critical time, Gaza withdrawal. Do you think it's going to work out?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: This is a critical time and it's really -- Palestinian peace negotiations is one of the major priorities for the United States with Secretary Rice. So this is an important trip where she's going to try to narrow some of the differences that have existed. And if she can do that, that will allow, perhaps, for a greater measure of success for the withdrawal of Israeli settlements from Gaza and then, correspondingly, for a peaceful Gaza in the future, whereby attacks won't be coming in the state of Israel by terrorist groups. That is the major concern, that when the settlements -- settlers leave and the settlements are dismantled, will Gaza --

QUESTION: Which they're not being at the moment, are they, in the sense that -- not just Gaza, but elsewhere, there is expansion of settlements going on?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: In other words, the idea that Prime Minister Sharon has put forward, as you know, is that in mid-August the Israelis will begin to dismantle the settlements in Gaza and they will leave.

QUESTION: Yes, but I'm talking about settlements elsewhere. There are settlements elsewhere which are being expanded, which are clearly causing problems for this whole process.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: But a Gaza withdrawal creates an enormous opportunity, because if it can succeed and if Gaza can be a secure place free of attacks against the state of Israel, that will then give momentum for progress in the other part of the peace negotiations, which is what is done with the West Bank. And of course, that is a far more complex problem in itself.

If, on the other hand, in the wake of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, there are increased attacks against Israel, that is

going to depress any possibility of movement in the West Bank. So, it's a very important question. We're focused on that. We have an American General working with the Palestinians and Israelis and we have Mr. Wolfensohn, the former President of the World Bank, also working to try to create a better economic environment in Gaza. So, the stakes are very high. Secretary Rice's intent is to help the Palestinians and Israelis achieve a success.

QUESTION: You mentioned Jim Wolfensohn's involvement, suggestions that there may be a \$3 billion aid package that he's trying to work out. Will there be more money for the Palestinians if and when Israel withdraws from Gaza?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, the United States has just committed, in recent months, \$350 million in new money to support the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank in Gaza and we very much hope that the European Union, other European countries, and Arab countries will increase their support for the Palestinians.

We've had confidence in Abu Mazen, the Palestinian leader. We think he's a man who can bring Palestinians towards a peaceful future in Israel. But he's going to need help, because much of the infrastructure in both Gaza and the West Bank has declined significantly because of the fighting in recent years. The Palestinians need that kind of help. They need help in health care. They particularly need help in job creation and that is a job for the business community, but also, we need government to break down the barriers to that kind of business activity.

All this is important because there is a Palestinian government that is competent and that wants peace with Israel and deserves our help.

QUESTION: I'm going to ask a question about contact with groups like Hamas. Britain and the EU have had contact. America will not. Do you view them as a terrorist organization? But isn't it time to bring them into the political process?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: You know, movements in groups are brought into the political process when they're deemed to be responsible. There are several terrorist --

QUESTION: So you're saying that Britain and the EU are irresponsible, then --

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: No, I didn't say that. No, that's not fair. I didn't say that at all. I said the groups that are brought into the contract -- into the process have to be responsible and we don't believe that Hamas has been a responsible actor. We don't believe that Islamic Jihad or Hezbollah have been responsible. We've had a lot of experience with these three groups. We know them quite well. We've been on the receiving end of some of their attacks and so, we judge them by their actions. We judge them in a very realistic way and it's not for the United States to choose who's up and who's down in the Middle East. Certainly, if you ask us and if you ask who will we talk to and who will we not, we'll talk to people who are responsible and pragmatic and who want to achieve peace not through the barrel of a gun, but --

QUESTION: So what is your opinion, then, of the contact that's been made by the EU and Britain?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We're not going to sit in judgment of other countries except to say we'll follow our own policy and our policy has been quite clear.

QUESTION: Secretary Rice is also going to Egypt. Laura Bush has been there and praised Mr. Mubarak for the boldness of his reforms in opening up a presidential race and yet, opposition is still attacked, opposition groups that attack opposition individuals. It was getting -- going back there. Secretary Rice is going to Egypt as well. We know that the First Lady, Laura Bush, has been there. She praised President Mubarak for his boldness in his reforms. Yet, opposition groups have been attacked. Individuals have been locked up. They're not free and fair elections, so what was the First Lady's role?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Of course not. The First Lady spoke for the United States and she spoke very well in Egypt and she represented our country in an extraordinarily effective way.

QUESTION: So, she's right to praise the boldness of the reforms, reforms which involve --

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And if you listen to what all of the United States Government is saying, including, of course, Mrs. Bush and her trip, the President and Secretary Rice, there is a complete uniformity in our message. And that is that we are a friend of Egypt. Egypt is an ally of longstanding -- of the United States. The United States has been heavily involved over 30 years in trying to help rebuild the Egyptian economy. We have been very supportive of the efforts of Egypt to reach out to Israel over more than 25 years.

And of course, we don't always agree with everything with the Government of Egypt. And in one respect, we believe that there ought to be greater openness and greater democratization in Egypt, but this does not mean that we are somehow in a state where we have a declining relationship with the Egyptian government. We're friends. We'll remain friends. We have a particular point of view and that is that the press should be free in the Arab world, that elections should be free and fair, and that people ought to have a chance to build democratic societies. That's true of what we say to the Egyptians as well as to the Saudis, as well as to other countries in the Arab world.

QUESTION: And you've certainly criticized another issue, the Iranian elections, the way they have been held, but -- you know, at least they're having elections. There are so many friends in the Arab world who aren't even doing that.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, many of -- actually, if you look around the Arab world these days, particularly in the Gulf and North Africa, there's been tremendous progress. There's a female minister now in the Kuwaiti Government, a female minister in the Qatar Government. Women have been given the right to vote in Kuwait. There's been progress in the Arab world on democratic rights and on elections in Iran. Yes, there are elections being held this weekend. And yet, of the 1014 candidates for President, the Guardian Council disqualified 1,008 of them. In the Majlis elections of February 2004, the majority of people elected are not allowed to sit.

And so, you have to look at things as they are. Yes, there are elections. Are they free and fair elections? Absolutely not. Can women aspire to higher office --

QUESTION: Yeah, but they're not free in Egypt either, are they, in the sense that you believe free and fair?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: You have to judge each country by its own cultural and societal mores and its own history. Each country is unique. We have not been uncritical of Egypt on many aspects of democratization. But certainly, if you look at the situation in Iran, there is a far greater basis for international criticism of what's happened.

QUESTION: On the Iranian elections still, do you think there are signs that people are engaged in this process, young people particularly?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Oh, there are. I mean, we remember the promise of 1997, the last two elections in particular, where even people deemed to be reformers were elected. And yet, the Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader have exercised a degree of control over the political system that has impeded the efforts of reformers to succeed in Iran. And the real story of Iran today is that they have a very youthful population. More than half the population is below the age of 35. Of course, there's a great desire for freedom and for democracy. We see it. We feel it, as do you. And yet, there's no channel for those people because now, they have to vote in elections that are truly not free and fair.

QUESTION: Well, you say there's no channel, but we understand polls have been kept open later so people can take part. Clearly, there's an engagement in the political process going on.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Do you think an election where 1008 of 1014 candidates having been taken out of the race is free and fair? By anyone's standard, it's not free and fair.

QUESTION: When you look at the candidates and particularly, Mr. Rafsanjani the frontrunner, now he is someone who says he wants a better relationship with America. He no longer views America as the great Satan. Do you think he is someone who the U.S. could work with?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, first, we shouldn't even have -- try to predict the outcome of the elections, dangerous for anyone to do in my line of work. We'll have to see who is elected. We'll have to see how that person constitutes the government and most importantly, we'll have to look beyond the campaign and look at the actions. So, can the Iranian government demonstrate convincingly that it's not trying to develop a nuclear weapons program? We support the efforts of Britain, France, and Germany to end nuclear activities there peacefully and by negotiation.

Can the Iranian government that is to be elected assure us that it will no longer be the main funder and strategic director of the major terrorist groups in the Middle East? Will the next Iranian government accept the right of Israel to exist? And most importantly, I think, for the people of Iran, will it free up the conditions and life in Iran? Will it let women be free? Will it let people run for political office who want to run for political office?

QUESTION: On the issue of nuclear weapons, Mr. Rafsanjani is certain that Iran is not trying to get hold of a nuclear bomb. In fact, that's been their position all along. Why can't you just believe them?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We prefer to believe the facts and the International Atomic Energy Agency has said that Iran misled it for 17 years about nuclear research. We have to look at those facts. We can't discount them. During those 17 years, successful Iranian Government said we're not trying, we're not doing what now they have admitted they were doing -- illegal under the IAEA -- activities designed to produce fissile material and a nuclear weapon. And we have to be -- we can't be naïve when we look at Iran. We have to judge Iran by what it does, not just by what it says.

QUESTION: But if at the end of the day, the EU talks conclude that Iran is not building a nuclear weapon, you will still have a problem, wouldn't you, because you know exactly Iran shouldn't even have a civil nuclear capability.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, the basis of the United States support for the European negotiating team is that -- is that the end result will be that Iran will not have access to the fuel cycle, that all nuclear fuel activities will cease and they will be dismantled. If that is the result of negotiations, then we'll be very pleased. But if that's not the result of negotiations, then obviously, it'll be a different story. And our only hope is that the Iranian Government would negotiate more seriously with the European Union. We very much support France and Germany. But they've got to be a difficult negotiating partner in Iran.

QUESTION: And just finally on Iran, essentially you're saying there's no change in the U.S. relations with Iran and that's the nuclear issue as a result?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: You know, I think it's important that we just judge the new Iranian Government by its actions on these three critical issues: nuclear weapons, terrorism and the freedom deficit within Iran itself. If there are changes and they're fundamental changes, then of course, you'll see a response from the United States. But if there's a continuation of the status quo that has brought such -- our relations at such a low level, then I think you will in -- a proper way for the United States to behave is not to prejudge the situation, but to judge countries and people actually by what they do.

QUESTION: Finally, a quick question on the G-8; you're going to London. Secretary Rice is going to London. And there is that pressure still that the U.S. ups its aid budget and tackle the issue of climate change, (inaudible) both those, it's clear that you're not going to double the aid budget of the United States which you say you've tripled already for Sub-Saharan Africa and that you're not going to commit to climate change targets, cutting CO₂ emissions. So where is the evidence that America is actually working with its international allies in a group like the G-8? Where is the evidence that this is a new era of diplomacy?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, first look at the results. And we very much admire the leadership of Prime Minister Blair in meeting the G-8. We think it's entirely appropriate that the G-8 focus on the developing world, on poverty eradication and in Africa. And when President Bush and Prime Minister Blair were together here in Washington just last week, they announced, a British-American agreement on debt rescheduling -- 100 percent debt rescheduling for the poorest countries. That is a very dramatic step forward. There is your evidence. It would also say --

QUESTION: Yeah, but (inaudible) GDP that you spend on aid?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I would also say this, the proper way to measure a country's commitment to the developing world is to look at all the instruments available, its official development grant, is trade, which is very important for developing countries, its business investment. And increasingly, it's the efforts of the nongovernmental organizations and the structure of American society which is highly decentralized is that those organizations, the NGOs and business play a proportionate far greater role in our society than they do in yours.

And so preponderance of American assistance to Africa and our government has tripled our aid granting Africa is also coming from companies that create jobs, that lower trade barriers, NGOs like the Gates Foundation. The Gates Foundation is doing more than most governments to alleviate disease in Africa. We're very proud of the American society and Government's record that that's the proper way to measure it, not by simplistic numbers. That's the old-fashioned and I think rather outmoded way of looking at development assistance.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, indeed.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you.

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