



Remarks After Meeting With Lebanese President Michel Suleiman

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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SECRETARY RICE: Good afternoon. I have just had an opportunity to meet for the first time the president of Lebanon, President Suleiman. We've had a very good conversation about the relationship between Lebanon and the United States. I have expressed on behalf of President Bush and on behalf of the American people our desire to support Lebanon, its government, its democratic institutions and its people in building a fully sovereign Lebanon, a peaceful Lebanon, and a Lebanon that is prosperous and democratic for all of its people. It was really delightful to meet the President. I know that it has been a struggle for Lebanon to get to the election of its president, but I come away knowing that Lebanon has succeeded in electing a very fine man, and we look forward to working with him. And I will have some other meetings with Lebanese officials, so perhaps I can take one question from --



MODERATOR: From the American side.

MODERATOR: Yes. Arshad.

QUESTION: Secretary Rice, Arshad Mohammed of Reuters. Why would people not view the Doha agreement as a defeat for American policy because Hezbollah achieved one of its objectives, veto power, that it had been denied for many months? And what would you say to people here who might regard the United States as perhaps interfering in their domestic politics because of your clear support for Mr. Siniora (inaudible) longstanding U.S. policy (inaudible)?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first of all, in terms of the Doha agreement, the United States has welcomed the Doha agreement as a good first step for Lebanon in resolving what was a longstanding crisis that, frankly, had gone on too long. And while it is true that there was an agreement on a simple blocking minority, there was also agreement on a formation of a government with Prime Minister-designate Siniora. There was finally the election of a president of Lebanon, for which the United States has advocated for some time, and there was the freeing up of the democratic institutions of Lebanon so they could function on behalf of the Lebanese people.

And so, obviously, in any compromise there are compromises, but this was an agreement that I think served the interests of the Lebanese people; and since it served the interests of the Lebanese people, it served the interests of the United States.

As to the question about the United States and who it supports, we support the democratically elected government of Lebanon. That's who we support.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

SECRETARY RICE: Yes, right here.

QUESTION: You used to say that Syria has a direct influence on Lebanon. And Syria starting now negotiations with the Occident pro-Paris. And Mr. Olmert said, and according to Olmert, Syria maybe started direct negotiations with Israel. How would it affect the situation in Lebanon?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, thank you. First of all, in terms of the negotiations between Israel and Syria, I was just in Israel, and we have been supportive of the idea that a peace in the Middle East will ultimately have to be a comprehensive peace. This, in fact, was said as a part of the Annapolis dialogue. If you remember, all three tracks were noted. It's simply that we believe that the Palestinian-Israeli track is the one that is most advanced. But advancing the Palestinian-Israeli track, by no means, means that the other two tracks, both the Syrian track and the Lebanese track, can be put to the side. There will have to be, ultimately, a comprehensive peace. And so we support the efforts of Israel to find that peace with Syria.

As to the Syrians going to France, I was also just in France. And the French are having their Mediterranean meeting of the Mediterranean states. I believe it was founded as a -- not as a political dialogue, but really to talk about economic relations, to talk about issues like water and the environment. And obviously, neighbors need to talk about those things.

But as to relations between Syria and Lebanon, Syria and Lebanon are neighbors; they are neighboring states. But their relations should be on the basis of neighboring states. That means that they should be relations as equals. It means that there should be an exchange of ambassadors so that diplomatic relations can be on equal footing, as they are between any two sovereign states. It means that there should be a demarcation of the border between Lebanon and Syria so that in international affairs it's important to have demarcated borders. And that, by the way, is also an obligation of UN Security Council resolutions.

And so I hope that Lebanon will have good relations with all of its neighbors, but I hope that its relations with its neighbors will be on the basis of equality, sovereignty for Lebanon, respect for Lebanese democratic institutions, respect for Lebanese independence and, ultimately, respect for the Lebanese people.

Thank you very much.

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[BACK TO TOP](#)