



Interview on LBC's Kalam Al-Nass With Marcel Ghanem

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs
Washington, DC
December 1, 2006

QUESTION: Good evening, Mr. Burns, the undersecretary of State. We would like to welcome you to this program.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be with you.

QUESTION: Mr. Burns, first of all, what are your comments on the demonstration tomorrow that is going to take place by the opposition in Beirut? Do you think that this is a protest or a coup to topple the government?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I think all of the friends of Lebanon around the world -- and there are many, many friends of Lebanon all around the world, are very concerned about this demonstration. All of us want to see unity in Lebanon. We want to see the Lebanese enjoy peace and security and stability, and we want to see the Lebanese government be respected. Prime Minister Siniora is fully respected by all of the world leaders. He has earned that respect by the way that he has acquitted himself in office. And frankly there is little respect for those who would say that the way forward in Lebanon is through violence or intimidation.

And we worry about the influence of Syria and the influence of Iran. And so we support Prime Minister Siniora, and we hope that the demonstration tomorrow can be peaceful, and we hope that the unity of the current Lebanese government can be maintained. I think I speak for not just the United States, but for many countries around the world who want to see the current government continue its efforts to rebuild the country and to bring Lebanon back to peace.

QUESTION: But those who are going to demonstrate tomorrow are Lebanese people. What is Syria and Iran coming to do in this?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, unfortunately, Syria can't quite give up its wish to dominate Lebanon. Syria was there for 29 years, as you know better than me. And while I don't think the Lebanese authorities have concluded who killed Pierre Gemayel, a lot of countries around the world worry that there has been outside influence, continued negative outside influence. We know that both Syria and Iran wish to see a destabilization of the Lebanese government, which has been democratically elected. And so I am here to say that we have unconditional support for the government of Prime Minister Siniora, the Lebanese government, and we certainly don't wish to see the tactics of violence and intimidation by any group succeed in a democratic society like Lebanon.

QUESTION: Mr. Burns, why do you support the establishment of a government of the national unity in Palestine, and you don't support such a government in Lebanon?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, in Lebanon, the people of Lebanon elected their own government. And this government is in power; it is serving the people of Lebanon, and there is no reason to somehow undo the results of a free and democratic election. The situation of course in the Palestinian territories is completely different because you have there a group, Hamas, which has still pledged to destroy Israel and to practice terrorism. The situations could not be more dissimilar.

But I just want to repeat again, of course citizens have the right to voice their opinions. No one would ever disagree with that, but we worry about outside powers; we worry about the influence of Syria and the pernicious influence of Iran. And all of us who are friends with Lebanon want to see Lebanon truly independent and truly sovereign, and we want to see the outside powers stop intervening in the affairs of Lebanon.

QUESTION: Mr. Burns, do you have concerns about a civil war in Lebanon? Do you share the opinions of some U.S. diplomats who see the possibility of a civil war in Lebanon, especially that John Bolton, the U.S. envoy to the United Nations talk about major crisis that are going to happen in Lebanon.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, we have confidence in the government of Lebanon, and that government has had in it Sunni and Shi'a and Christian. It is a government that makes up, that comprises the diversity of Lebanon itself. And no thinking person who has respect for the Lebanese people and the Lebanese state would ever want to see Lebanon return to a civil war.

No, we believe that the Lebanese government is competent. We believe a Lebanese government has earned the respect and support of the international community. At the conference in early 2007 for the long-term reconstruction of Lebanon, I think you will see a tremendously positive response by the international financial community to help rebuild Lebanon because that is based on the credibility that Prime Minister Siniora and his government have earned in the world.

We don't have, I think the international community, such faith in Mr. Nasrallah or in Hezbollah, but we do have faith in the government of Lebanon, and we would like to see that government stay together and continue to represent all of the Lebanese people, the Shi'a, the Sunni, the Christians, all of the different factions that are comprising it.

QUESTION: But, Mr. Burns, there is General Aoun who is also participating in the demonstrations of tomorrow. So how do you qualify this participation?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, it's not for me to make judgments about individuals. We know General Aoun. I have met him. Many other Americans have met him. We have respect for him. We just wish that all of the Lebanese politicians would stand up and support a truly independent Lebanon where the influence of Syria will be kept out. And it's going to have to be up to General Aoun to decide what he wants to do. But we think that Lebanon is better off without Syria, better off without Syrian influence. And I can tell you, in our conversations with all of the European and Arab states, all of us want to see a truly independent Lebanon to continue.

And, again, I do think you are seeing, whether it's in the troop contributions in Southern Lebanon through UNIFIL, through the funds that are coming in to support the Lebanese people as they rebuild from that horrible war of this past summer, in the long-term reconstruction of the country, there is good will in the world; there is sympathy for the Lebanese people, for what the Lebanese people have had to suffer. But that is based upon a national government that is oriented towards reform and toward patriotism, that Lebanon might be truly sovereign, and to keep out the influence of Syria.

QUESTION: So do you think that Paris donors conference is linked to the government of Mr. Siniora being in office?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Oh, I think so. I think if for any reason the government does not continue, I don't think you have a consensus in the international community about assistance to Lebanon. The government has earned credibility. They have earned respect. They have done a good job in a very difficult situation of trying to keep the state and the government running and moving forward. And so I do think there is a direct correlation. I don't mean to say that as a threat; I think it's a statement of reality. That is the way international politics work, that people earn respect. And your government, the government that was democratically elected by all of the people Lebanon, it certainly has the respect of all of us around the world.

QUESTION: Mr. Nick Burns, undersecretary of State, I would like to thank you for being with us in our program.

Released on December 1, 2006



Published by the U.S. Department of State Website at <http://www.state.gov> maintained by the Bureau of Public Affairs.