

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Interview With Laurence Haim of Canal Plus Television

June 1, 2009

Crash of Air France Flight 447

Ms. Haim. Bonjour, Mr. President.

The President. Bonjour.

Ms. Haim. Thank you so much to welcome Canal Plus on I-Television for this first interview granted to the French press.

The President. Thank you.

Ms. Haim. We really appreciate it. Before we begin today, there was a terrible tragedy in France with this plane. The French people are requesting assistance from the American people. Is there anything you wanted to say about it, sir?

The President. Well, obviously, we're heartbroken by the news, although we don't yet know exactly what happened. Anytime there's an aviation problem, I think all of us are concerned.

The United States wants to provide every assistance possible in investigating what's happened. Obviously, until we know all the facts, I can't comment too much on the specifics. But I'm sure that those families who are waiting to find out what happened are going through a very difficult time right now, and my thoughts and prayers are with them.

President's Visit to the Middle East

Ms. Haim. I'm sure they will appreciate that very much, sir. Thank you so much for them.

Tomorrow we're leaving for the Middle East. It's going to be your first trip there. What do you want to achieve with this trip?

The President. Well, we're going to be traveling to Saudi Arabia; I'll be having discussions with King Abdallah. And then we'll travel to Cairo, in which I am delivering on a promise I made during the campaign to provide a framework, a speech of how I think we can remake relations between the United States and countries in the Muslim world.

Now, I think it's very important to understand that one speech is not going to solve all the problems in the Middle East. And so I think expectations should be somewhat modest.

What I want to do is to create a better dialog so that the Muslim world understands more effectively how the United States but also how the West thinks about many of these difficult issues like terrorism, like democracy, to discuss the framework for what's happened in Iraq and Afghanistan and our outreach to Iran, and also how we view the prospects for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Now, the flip side is I think that the United States and the West generally, we have to educate ourselves more effectively on Islam. And one of the points I want to make is, is that if you actually took the number of Muslims Americans, we'd be one of the largest Muslim countries in the world. And so there's got to be a better dialog and a better understanding between the two peoples.

Combating Extremism in Muslim States

Ms. Haim. You're always speaking about dialog. How can you do that with the young people who sometimes are very tempted by extremists? Does you—as, you know, kind of a new President of the United States, what do you want to tell them, the young people?

The President. Well, you know, I think the most important thing I want to tell young people is that, regardless of your faith, those who build as opposed to those who destroy, I think, leave a lasting legacy, not only for themselves but also for their nations. And the impulse towards destruction as opposed to how can we study science and mathematics and restore the incredible scientific and knowledge, the output that came about during centuries of Islamic culture——

Ms. Haim. Do you think it's easy, Mr. President?

The President. ——I think that has to be lifted up. And you're seeing some countries, I think, that are making more investments in education. I think the importance of educating women has to be something that's emphasized; if you look at indicators of human development across the board, those where girls are getting a chance for an education end up being more economically productive. How to reconcile this with some of the traditional values and norms of Islam, that's not for me to dictate, but, certainly, I think it's something that can be accomplished, and I want to encourage that.

President's Visit to the Middle East

Ms. Haim. When I met you on the campaign trail, you were telling me that you wanted to organize a Muslim summit. Do you still have that in mind?

The President. Well, you know, this is a start of what I think will be a long-term process. We'll have a speech; we'll have a roundtable discussion. It will give an opportunity, I think, for people around the world to engage in this discussion. It will be telecast in a wide variety of languages on our White House web site, whitehouse.gov. And my hope is, is that as a consequence you start seeing discussions not just at the Presidential level, but at every level of public life. And I hope I can spark some dialog and debate within the Muslim world, because I think there's a real struggle right now between those who believe that Islam is irreconcilable to modern life and those who believe that, actually, Islam has always been able to move side by side with progress.

France-U.S. Relations

Ms. Haim. During this trip, you're going also to Germany and to France for the D-Day. How can you qualify the nature of the relationship between the French people and the American people, and also between the two Presidents?

The President. Well, I've had a wonderful relationship with President Sarkozy. And we had a wonderful visit when we were there the last time in Strasbourg. And this time I'm sure we'll have very productive bilateral relations.

France is one of the most important countries in the world and helps to set trends in how we deal with everything from climate change to the global recession. And President Sarkozy, I think, has been very courageous in some of the decisions that he's made: his willingness to stand very firm in the need to deal with Afghanistan; his encouragement of tough direct diplomacy with Iran. I think those are areas where he's shown excellent leadership. So I think the American people continue to love all things French and——

France

Ms. Haim. What do you love about France, if I may ask?

The President. Well, let's see. Okay, we got the food. We've got the—we've got Paris. We've got the south of France, Provence, the wine.

Ms. Haim. The wine? Did you go to Provence?

The President. You know, the—I have traveled through the south of France when I was in college. I haven't been back for a long time. And so I need to get back there.

Afghanistan

Ms. Haim. Just a serious question before the last one, because we don't have a lot of time. What do you expect from the French people, the French Government, about Afghanistan, precisely? Do you want them to have more troops?

The President. Well, I think we've put forward a framework, after having done a strategic review, of all the steps that need to be taken, not just militarily, but also diplomatically, as well as—in terms of development in Afghanistan. Our main goal is to have a Afghan Government that can deal with its security needs, but can assure that Afghanistan is not a safe haven. And if we can accomplish that, then we would love to get out of there as soon as possible.

In the meantime, there is going to need to be some military support for the elections, for basic security in many of these villages. We have provided a lot of troops. We expect all our NATO partners to contribute to that. But that's not the only contribution to make. We also need agricultural specialists. We need gendarmes to help train the police. We need people who understand water systems and electrical systems. So there's more than enough work to do, and I'm very pleased so far that the NATO community feels, I think, unified in the approach that we've put forward.

Message to Youth

Ms. Haim. Last question: You're loved by a lot of French people. They really see you as a model. What do you want again to say to the young people who are inspired by you and who are going through a very difficult time at this moment?

The President. Well, you know, I think that the main thing I always want to tell young people is that if they work hard and they aren't constrained by the status quo, by what has happened before, then they can remake the world. Now, I think that they have to do it in a responsible way.

I think—when I was young, certainly, I thought I could change the world overnight and that I didn't have to necessarily make all the sacrifices needed to do it, so nothing comes easy. But transmitting to young people the sense that this is really their world for the making and that on issues like climate change or economic inequality or how do we deal with world health issues or how do we deal with conflict, that in all these areas, creating a more peaceful, prosperous world is up to them. That's what I want to encourage.

Ms. Haim. That's your dream, Mr. President?

The President. Yes.

French Language

Ms. Haim. Last question——

The President. You've already had a last question.

Ms. Haim. No, last question—[*laughter*]*—a little one. Do you speak French? That's my last question.*

The President. My French is terrible. I studied it in high school, and I just forgot it. Now, Michelle actually speaks a little French.

Ms. Haim. She's coming with you?

The President. She will be there. I'm not—I think she's definitely coming to Normandy with us. And then I think she may be staying in Paris for a few days.

Ms. Haim. Not one more in French, Mr. President. [*Laughter*]

The President. I need to work on my French.

Ms. Haim. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. *Merci beaucoup.* It's a pleasure.

The President. Thank you so much.

Ms. Haim. Thank you. I appreciate it.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 3:50 p.m. in the Library at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia; and President Nicolas Sarkozy of France. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on June 2. A portion of this interview could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Interviews :: Canal Plus Television.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Haim, Laurence; King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud; Obama, Michelle; Sarkozy, Nicolas.

Subjects: Afghanistan : Afghan military and security forces; Afghanistan : Economic growth and development; Afghanistan : International diplomatic efforts; Afghanistan : NATO, role; Afghanistan : Provincial Reconstruction Teams; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Afghanistan : U.S. policy review; Commerce, international : Global financial markets :: Unrest; Communications : News media :: Presidential interviews; Egypt : President Obama's visit; Egypt : President's visit; Environment : Climate change ; Environment : Climate change; France : Afghanistan :: French military forces, deployment; France : Air France Flight 447 crash; France : Canal Plus Television; France : Iran, diplomatic engagement with; France : President; France : President Obama's visits; France : Relations with U.S.; Iran : Diplomatic relations with U.S.; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Middle East : Democratization; Middle East : Peace and democracy efforts; Middle East : President Obama's visit; Middle East : Relations with U.S.; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Saudi Arabia : King; Saudi Arabia : President Obama's visit; Terrorism : Global threat.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900426.