

The President. We'll be fine.

Ms. Levi. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 4:05 p.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Ehud

Olmert and former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel; and President Mahmud Ahmadi-nejad of Iran. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 6. Portions of this interview could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Interview With Hisham Bourar of Alhurra Television January 4, 2008

President's Upcoming Visit to the Middle East

Mr. Bourar. Thank you, Mr. President, for taking the time to do this interview on Alhurra TV. Big trip to the Middle East—what are your objectives, and why now?

The President. Now because I believe that it's possible to advance the Annapolis agenda; now because I believe this is going to be an—that it will be a chance to be effective on my trip. I am going to talk—advance three things: one, the vision of two states, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace; two, to convince our friends and allies in the region that it is in their interest to support the peace process; and three is to remind people that the United States is committed to helping secure the region, that we have a active presence in the Middle East, and that presence is not going to wane. It's a—that we're committed to helping people realize—deal with the threats and the problems of the 21st century.

President's Role in the Peace Process

Mr. Bourar. What can you do personally to press both sides, the Israelis and the Palestinians, to reach an agreement this year?

The President. Yes. Well, first of all, the agreement—they must decide they want to reach agreement. In other words—and so

the first thing I can do is to make sure there's a sincere desire on the parts of President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert to achieve an agreement. I believe that desire exists. The Annapolis conference was a success because they wanted it to be a success. And it's to give them confidence and to encourage them to come up with the—what a state will look like, the—define that state so that people there in the region can have hope that this kind of a long-time conflict will finally come to an end. And the first step is the definition of a state.

I can press when there needs to be pressed. I can hold hands when there needs to be—hold hands. And so I'm—I will go to encourage them to stay focused on the big picture. There's going to be all kinds of distractions, and people will be trying to throw up roadblocks, and people will be trying to cause these gentlemen to—not to—to lose sight of what's possible. And my job is to help them keep a vision on what is possible.

Palestinian State

Mr. Bourar. Do you still believe that the—your vision of a Palestinian state can be achieved before you leave office?

The President. I think the outlines, the definition of a state can be achieved. The implementation of a state will be subject to a roadmap. In other words, there's a lot of work that has to be done. Palestinian

security forces have to be reformed—which we’re helping with, by the way. The entrepreneurial class of people has to be encouraged with new capital. The institutions of government need to be strengthened.

And so the state will come into being, subject to—but the first step is to—here’s what a state will look like. And I believe we can get that done by the time I leave office.

Middle East Peace Process

Mr. Bourar. Will you be asking Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, to normalize relations with Israel?

The President. I’ll be reminding the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, that in order for this to be successful, in order for this process to work, there has to be strong support for both the Palestinians and the Israelis in the neighborhood. And that’s why the Annapolis conference—another reason it was an important conference, because in that room were the—my friend, the King of Saudi Arabia, kindly sent his Foreign Minister to that Annapolis meeting. I thought it was a strong signal. And so both sides are going to need to know that they’ll have support from the neighborhood.

Iran

Mr. Bourar. Recently, there has been some rapprochement between Gulf countries and Iran. Do you feel that the last NIE report makes it difficult for you to convince these countries that Iran still poses a threat to national security?

The President. Yes. I’m sure this subject will come up, and I will remind them that the NIE said that, one, Iran had a military covert program. They suspended the program. I will also remind them that a regime that once had a program could easily start the program up again, and that the key ingredients to having a weapons program is, one, the capacity to enrich uranium; secondly, the ability to take that uranium and make a bomb; and thirdly, the ability to deliver the uranium—the bomb by rockets.

Well, the rocket program still exists. As you know, they say they had—only for civilian purposes, they’re learning to enrich. Well, if you can learn to enrich for civilian purposes, you can easily transfer that knowledge for military purposes. And therefore, Iran is a threat. And so that will be my message.

And my other message will be, we’ve got a strategy to deal with it, and that is to prevent them from learning how to enrich. And I’ll explain to them the different types of sanctions and international efforts we’re making and how they can help as well.

Syria

Mr. Bourar. Recent visits to Damascus by U.S. lawmakers, like a recent one by Senator Arlen Specter, a Republican, and Senator Kennedy: Do they help or undermine your position toward Syria?

The President. That’s an interesting question. I don’t know. But President Asad must understand that if he wants better relations with the United States—and frankly better relations in the region—the first thing he’s got to do is stop interfering in the Lebanese Presidential process. And I would hope that those representatives sent that message to President Asad.

I don’t know how he interprets these meetings, but one thing he can’t be mistaken about is the position of the U.S. Government, the White House. And our position is, is that you can have better relations, a better way forward with the United States, but you have got to get out of Lebanon, in terms of the Presidential elections, and stop harboring Hamas, stop letting suiciders go into Iraq. And you—there’s a better way forward.

Lebanon

Mr. Bourar. Speaking of Lebanon, what could the United States do to break the current stalemate which left the country without a President?

The President. Yes. We're making it awfully clear to—publicly and privately—that the—Sleiman, who was selected by the—by a lot of the players there inside Lebanon, is the right choice; if that's what they want, that's who we support—and that the obstacle to that Presidency going forward is Syria.

So I'll be spending some time there in the Middle East discussing this very subject because a free Lebanon is in the interests of everybody in the region. And there's a lot of common ground with the U.S. position, and there—like the Saudis and other nations agree that we ought to have a free Lebanon, free of Syrian influence.

President's Legacy

Mr. Bourar. Last question, Mr. President. How do you think people in the Middle East will remember you?

The President. I hope they remember me as the guy who was willing to fight extremists who murdered the innocent to achieve political objectives and, at the same time, had great faith in the people, the average citizen of the Middle East, to self-govern; that the Middle East has got a fantastic future, and that I admire the great traditions of the Middle East and believe that the average man can succeed mightily; that societies are best served when they respond to the will of people, and that we must reject the extremists who have a different

view of that, the people who only prey on hopelessness. That's what I would hope.

I would hope that they would say, President Bush respects my religion and has great love for the human being and believes in human dignity. I know my image can be different at times. I had to make some tough choices on war and peace. On the other hand, I hope people are now beginning to see the emergence of a free Iraq, based upon a modern Constitution, is part of my vision for achieving peace that we all want.

Mr. Bourar. Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.

The President. Yes, sir.

Mr. Bourar. Thank you.

The President. Happy New Year.

Mr. Bourar. Happy New Year to you.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 4:22 p.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel; King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud and Minister of Foreign Affairs Saud al-Faysal bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia; President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; and Gen. Michel Sleiman, commander, Lebanese Armed Forces. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 6.

Interview With Nadia Bilbassy Charters of Al Arabiya Television January 4, 2008

Middle East Peace Process

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Mr. President, thank you very much for your time, as always, and thank you for the interview.

The President. Thank you.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. The major obstacle to peace is the settlement activities.

Would you request from Prime Minister Olmert a freeze on the settlements?

The President. I think the major obstacle to peace is going to be the politics of both Palestinians and Israelis trying to take advantage of the difficult work that these two leaders are going to have to do to define a state; that's what I think. I think that