

the establishment of a Palestinian democracy to live side by side with Israel in peace.

As you break your Ramadan fast at this Iftaar dinner, let us renew our faith in the universality of freedom. Let us celebrate the millions of Muslims that we are proud to call American citizens. And let us honor the many Muslim nations that America is proud to call friends.

Laura and I are grateful you're here. Thank you for coming. We wish you a blessed Ramadan. And now I ask the Imam to say the blessing.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:16 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Cmdr. Abuhena M. Saifulislam, USN, Navy Chaplain Corps.

Interview With Elie Nakouzi of Al Arabiya

October 4, 2007

Mr. Nakouzi. Mr. President, it's nice to see you. It's nice to meet you. And how are you doing?

The President. Welcome. Come on in the Oval Office. I'm doing great. Thank you. I welcome you here. And I thank you for the opportunity to talk to you about some of the decisions that I have made right here in this Oval Office. I'm honored you've come.

President's Decisionmaking

Mr. Nakouzi. Actually, I want to tell the people of the Middle East that this is the place where big decisions are made. This is the office. But here it comes to my mind that how hard it is on you, Mr. President, to take like—a big decision like war, for example—is it that easy to take a decision such like war—

The President. No, it's the hardest decision a President can make. And when I campaigned for office, I never really thought about the decision to put men and women in harm's way. I never thought that that would happen. Circumstances changed, of course, and I had to make some very difficult decisions about how to protect our homeland and take action necessary to—the actions that I think will yield the peace.

And so whether it be in Afghanistan or Iraq, I was—I have made those decisions. And I will tell you they're hard decisions, because I understand the consequences. One of the hardest things for me is to meet with a mother. I met with a mother yesterday in Pennsylvania who lost her son in combat. And you know, those can be very tearful and emotional moments, and I understand that. And my—the only thing I try to do is provide as much comfort as I can and to assure the mom, in this case, that I thought the decision was necessary for peace, and necessary for our security, and that I valued the fact that her son would volunteer, and that I vowed to honor that sacrifice by achieving our objectives.

Anyway, this is the room where I make the decisions.

War on Terror

Mr. Nakouzi. But would these moments—I mean, these emotional moments, would they make you reconsider or rethink about what's going on in our area now?

The President. Not really. As a matter of fact, I leave most of the meetings reassured that the loved one, in this case, fully understanding what we were doing. See, I believe that, one, it's noble to liberate 25 million people from a tyrant; two, that we cannot allow Iraq to be a safe haven for people who have sworn allegiance to those who have attacked us. In other words, I believe we must defeat the extremists there so we don't have to face them here at home. And three, I believe the spread of liberty will yield peace. And I believe the Middle East is plenty capable of being a part of the world where liberty flourishes. That's what I believe people want.

And so I leave those meetings saddened by the fact that a person has pain in her heart—and yesterday she had pain in her heart—but encouraged by the fact that her son died for a noble cause and a necessary cause. And that's exactly what she told me.

Islam/Religious Freedom

Mr. Nakouzi. Actually, I want to thank you again, Mr. President, for giving us the opportunity to talk for the first time to the Arab world, to address them with the big concerns. I know we have a great deal of

questions. I know you have a very tight schedule—

The President. Sure. I want to show you the Rose Garden, one of the most famous areas—

Mr. Nakouzi. It's a great chance for me. I heard, Mr. President, also, that you are receiving an Iftaar—

The President. Yes, I am.

Mr. Nakouzi. —in the White House, which is, of course, a Muslim ritual

The President. It is.

Mr. Nakouzi. But I want to tell you—and I hope this doesn't bother you at all—that in the Islamic world, they think that President Bush is an enemy of Islam—

The President. Sure.

Mr. Nakouzi. —that he wants to destroy their religion, what they believe in. Is that in any way true, Mr. President?

The President. No, it's not. I've heard that, and it just shows—to show a couple of things: One, that the radicals have done a good job of propagandizing. In other words, they've spread the word that this really isn't peaceful people versus radical people or terrorists; this is really about the America not liking Islam.

Well, first of all, I believe in an almighty God, and I believe that all the world, whether they be Muslim, Christian, or any other religion, prays to the same God. That's what I believe. I believe that Islam is a great religion that preaches peace. And I believe people who murder the innocent to achieve political objectives aren't religious people, whether they be a Christian who does that—we had a person blow up our—blow up a Federal building in Oklahoma City who professed to be a Christian. But that's not a Christian act to kill innocent people.

Mr. Nakouzi. Exactly.

The President. And I just simply don't subscribe to the idea that murdering innocent men, women, and children—particularly Muslim men, women, and children in the Middle East—is an act of somebody who is a religious person.

We are having an Iftaar dinner tonight—I say, “we”—it's my wife and I. This is the seventh one in the 7 years I've been the President. It gives me a chance to say *Ramadan Mubarak*. The reason I do this is, I want

people to understand about my country. In other words, I hope this message gets out of America. I want people to understand that one of the great freedoms in America is the right for people to worship any way they see fit. If you're a Muslim, an agnostic, a Christian, a Jew, a Hindu, you're equally American.

And the value—the most valuable thing I think about America is that—particularly if you're a religious person—you can be free to worship, and it's your choice to make. It's not the state's choice, and you shouldn't be intimidated after you've made your choice. And that's a right that I jealously guard.

Secondly, I want American citizens to see me hosting an Iftaar dinner.

Mr. Nakouzi. That's a strong message for the Americans.

The President. It is a strong message. I want to remind your listeners that one of the first things I did after September the 11th is, I went to the local mosque. And I did because I wanted to send a message that those who came to kill Americans were young terrorists, and they do not reflect the views of the vast majority of peaceful people in the Middle East; and that our—precisely the message I was trying to send, the war is not a struggle against Muslims, the Muslim religion; it is a struggle of honorable, peaceful people throughout the world against the few who want to impose their vision.

[At this point, there was a change in location, and the interview resumed as follows.]

War on Terror/Progress in Iraq/Spread of Freedom

Mr. Nakouzi. Actually, Mr. President, we are talking about these terrorists and what's going on in the world right now. Are you also a man of war, as some try to describe, President Bush?

The President. Oh, no, no, I believe the actions we have taken will make it more likely peace happens. I dream it will be—the last thing I want to be is a President during war. Now, remember, we got attacked. And I responded, after careful deliberation, in an attempt to make sure that—with a strategy of protecting ourselves. We can't allow these people that attacked us to have safe haven. We must not give them an opportunity to

strike us again. And therefore, it's important to keep the pressure on.

On the other hand, the ultimate way for peace is for people to realize the great blessings of liberty. And what's interesting—and what has taken place ought to be hopeful to people in the Middle East—is that two young democracies have sprung up where people, when given a chance, voted. See, I believe there is a universal God. I believe the God that the Muslim prays to is the same God that I pray to. After all, we all came from Abraham. I believe in that universality. And I believe a gift of that Almighty to every man, woman, and child is freedom; I really do. And I think people, if given a chance, will seize freedom. And it's liberty and free societies, not—they don't have to look like America—an Iraqi democracy is going to be Iraqi; it's going to reflect Iraqi traditions and Iraqi history.

There are some universal aspects to liberty: One, people can vote; people can express their opinion; people can be in a free press; people ought to be allowed to go to the town square and protest against their government without fear of reprisal. And when given that opportunity, 12 million Iraqis went to the polls.

War on Terror/Iraq

Mr. Nakouzi. So, excuse me, Mr. President, what you're trying to say is, sometimes a decision of war—you have to take a decision of war in order to achieve peace.

The President. That's exactly right.

Mr. Nakouzi. And that's what happened in Iraq.

The President. First of all, yes. I was very concerned about the dictator in Iraq. He was an enemy of the United States of America. He had ties to terrorists—I'm not saying those who attacked us on September the 11th, but I am saying ties to terrorists. He had a lot of money that he was willing to spend on weapons of mass destruction. We didn't find the weapons, but he certainly had the knowledge. And in my judgment, over time, he would have been able to develop those weapons, and they would have been—one thing the Middle East doesn't need is a nuclear arms race.

Former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq

Mr. Nakouzi. Yes, we're going to discuss this.

The President. Well, this guy doesn't—the man, Saddam Hussein, had capability; but remember, there's also a human condition. I believe in human rights. I believe every life has value, whether it be an American life or a life of a person in the Middle East. And this brutal guy killed hundreds of thousands of his own people. And he was unbelievably brutal to neighbors and, as well, to Iraqis. And there's—liberation is a powerful—to me, liberating people is a powerful step toward peace. I wish we didn't have to do this militarily. I was hoping that diplomacy would work. I gave diplomacy a lot of chance to work.

Mr. Nakouzi. But it didn't.

The President. It did not work. So the choice was his, not mine. He had the choice as to whether or not this issue would be resolved peacefully. See, that's the interesting thing that has been turned around. And so I don't regret the decision. As a matter of fact, I feel it was the right decision to this day. And now the question is, will America keep its commitment to the millions of Iraqis who want this society to work? And the answer to that is, yes, we will.

Iraq

Mr. Nakouzi. And here, Mr. President, I would love to ask—I mean, for the Iraqis now, they know and they keep on listening to the news. Sometimes we tell them we want to withdraw the troops. And now we're talking about the partition of Iraq, which is very, very bad news for the Iraqis.

The President. Yes, it is.

Mr. Nakouzi. I know you refused this. You want the unity of Iraq. But what if this Iraqi—what if, in the next administration, another President comes to the office and believes in the partition of Iraq? What's going to happen then?

The President. I don't think it will happen. I don't think it's going to happen.

Progress in Iraq

Mr. Nakouzi. How do you guarantee?

The President. Well, first of all, an American President must understand that Iraq is a sovereign nation operating under its own Constitution. And I'm very confident that the will of Iraq will prevail. And I know there's some noise out of here about partition. But most folks who follow this issue don't support partition, and they don't think it's a good idea.

What Iraq is going to have to do is get the proper balance between the central Government and the Provinces—the very same thing we've been worried about here in America for years. What is the right road between the States and Washington? So that's a constant discussion. But that's what they're going to have to do in Iraq as well. And they're going to need the security situation such that they're able to have an honest political discourse.

So our step one was to help them secure their neighborhoods—and it's working—and make sure these radicals, such as Al Qaida and some of these Shi'a groups, many of whom—which are criminal, aren't able to have their way with this society. And now we'll work toward helping these folks have the important discussion about what should be the role of Baghdad, or what should be the role of the Provincial governments. And when they get that right, when they get settled out, then I think you'll see a much more unified country.

And it's going to be very hard for an American President or any other outside country to dictate to the Iraqis, "Here's what your government must look like," because the Iraqis will show over time that they're capable of making these decisions themselves, and they are making hard decisions right now, by the way.

Spread of Freedom/Iraq

Mr. Nakouzi. I know that your message, your deep message was—to the Arab world—was democracy, freedom, human rights. And you've said too many times that the first message is democracy, is that you have rights, you people of the Middle East, to be free. But now, is democracy still a priority? Because all we hear now in Iraq is, let's achieve security; let's achieve stability.

Is democracy in the Middle East on hold now, waiting for security first?

The President. Well, first of all, no. I strongly believe in the freedom movement. It's ingrained in my soul. It comes from my belief that freedom is universal. And I believe freedom is ingrained in everybody's soul, and if just given a chance, they'll reach for it.

Now, in Iraq, in order for the Government to have breathing space, to be able to do the hard work of reconciliation so that the dreams of the average citizen in Iraq can be realized—which is a free society—there's got to be security. And so security is really a step, an important step, in the freedom movement.

You can't make the decisions if you're worried about getting blown up. And what the enemy wants to do, the enemy of a free Iraq, they want to create enough chaos and confusion inside Iraq that causes people to doubt. And they want, by the way, to kill enough innocent people that causes the American people to lose their patience and determination to help freedom movements.

Not every freedom movement requires military action. But freedom movement does require U.S. commitment to helping reformers and just the average citizen realize the blessings of a free society.

And so the freedom movement is the front and center of our foreign policy because I understand that the peace that we want—listen, we all want peace, except for those who are trying—

Mr. Nakouzi. "Except for those," exactly.

The President. But peace will succeed as more and more people become free.

[*At this point, there was a change in location, and the interview resumed as follows.*]

Iran

Mr. Nakouzi. Mr. President, we have moved from the Oval Office to the beautiful garden, and here I would like to ask you question that go through the minds of the Arab world. Our world is going through very difficult days.

Let me start with what people expect of me, which is Iran. Mr. President, have you made the decision to strike Iran, as some are saying, or trying to say that you will not leave

your administration and office before you strike Iran militarily?

The President. I have made the commitment that I would continue to work with the world to speak with one voice to the Iranians, to the Iranian Government, that we will work in ways that we can to make it clear to you that you should not have the know-how on how to make a weapon, because one of the great threats to peace and the world would be if Iranians showed up with a nuclear weapon. It would give them an opportunity to blackmail or threaten or possibly follow through with their stated objective, which is the destruction of Israel.

I, of course, said all options are on the table, but I made a pledge to the American people, we will work diplomatically to solve the problem. And that's why you see us at the United Nations working with the EU countries and China and Russia to send that clear message; and that we're going to continue to impose sanctions and make it harder for the Iranian Government to operate in the world until they change their mind, until they come to a new way forward. I have said that if they suspend their nuclear program, we will be at the table. But they have so far refused to do that.

I've also spoken to the Iranian people. And I want to make it clear to the people of Iran that the United States respects Iran, respects the people, respects the proud tradition, and that the Government of Iran has taken decisions that make it harder for them to live their lives. It's the decisions of the Government of Iran that have led to the isolation of the country. And that if this Government would only be responsible, would listen to the world, would not continue its weapons program—the idea of being able to have the capacity to make a weapon—then there's a better way forward for the Iranian people.

Iran

Mr. Nakouzi. But, Mr. President, is there a redline, either a timeline or redline—I hear from analysts that Iran wants today, or at least trying today to buy time in order for you to wait—to lose the time that you can make a big decision, such as going to war. In your judgment, is there a timetable? Is

there a ceiling that if negotiations would fail, a decision to go to war would be made?

The President. The Iranian regime must understand that I'm dedicated to the proposition that they should not continue their desire to enrich, as will be people that follow me in office. There is universal concern about Iranian ambition here in America. This is not a party issue, an issue between one party or the other. When the Iranian President announces to the world that he's going to destroy an ally or announces to the world that he will end up defying the world—that—no matter who the President is, there is going to be a continued focus and effort to achieve this issue, to resolve this issue.

Further Military Action in Iraq

Mr. Nakouzi. This issue, before I move to Iraq, which also, a lot of Iraqis are waiting for this—is there—there are some leaking to the press, and particularly the Arabic press—is it true that you have issued orders, Mr. President, to your senior generals in the American military to prepare for a major and precise strike that could happen during the end of January or February?

The President. I would call that empty propaganda. Evidently, there's a lot of gossip in parts of the country—world that try to scare people about me, personally, or my country or what we stand for. And that kind of gossip is just what it is: It's gossip; it's baseless gossip.

Progress in Iraq

Mr. Nakouzi. Mr. President, we have talked about Iraq. And you have tried to give us a message to assure the Iraqi people—when we were in the garden together—that you do not believe in the partition or the division of Iraq. And this is a very controversial issue in Iraq. And it is scary to even some of the leadership in Iraq. Just to continue and follow up with that issue, did we reach what we reached because of American mistakes or because of Iraqi mistakes and the Iraqi Government?

The President. I think, first of all, the successes in Iraq have been really quite extraordinary. One, the people of Iraq no longer have to live under a dictatorship—a brutal dictatorship. Secondly, the Iraqi people

wrote and ratified a modern Constitution. Thirdly, there is a government that is in place that is beginning to take on the responsibilities of governing. For example, quite a few billions have been spent in the Provinces by the central Government—that doesn't get any focus, but there is a functioning government; there is revenue sharing; there is money to the Provinces.

There is still work to be done, no question about it. But the biggest problem facing Iraq was because killers, bombers decided to murder innocent people in order to stop progress. So what I tell people is, is that the reason why there hasn't been smooth progress—and by the way, it's hard to transition from a dictatorship to a Iraqi democracy—but the main problem has been not the Iraqis or not the United States, but it's been the fact that people have murdered.

For example, what I find appalling is that Al Qaida bombed a holy site, a Muslim holy site; that there have been bombs in markets where innocent people are shopping and young children get destroyed by Muslim—people who profess to be Muslims. Their hearts are so hardened that they're willing to kill innocent people.

And so the task is to deny these people their ability to blow up the innocent. And that's exactly what's happening because of Iraqi bravery and Iraqi forces and a commitment by the Government to deal with murderers. See, I believe murderers murder, and it doesn't matter whether you're a Shi'a murderer or a Sunni murderer or a Christian murderer, you're a murderer. And the role of a state is to protect the innocent people from those murderers. And that's what you're seeing taking place in Iraq. But in the meantime, government is beginning to function better.

But people shouldn't be surprised that it's not instant democracy. First of all, the leaders never have had any practice with democracy, and they're learning to get along after years of tension and resentment. I support Prime Minister Maliki strongly, and I support the Presidency Council strongly. I just had President Talabani in to the Oval Office the other day. And the reason I do is because—I look for courage and commitment. And these leaders are courageous men, and

they're committed to a free Iraq. Has it been perfect progress? No. Is there more work to be done? You bet there's more work to be done. But are things better—getting better over time? Yes, they are. And that's what's important for the American people to know. And what's important for the Iraqi people to know is that we're going to support them, is that they've got our help because we want them to succeed. We want them to realize their dreams.

Iraqi Leadership

Mr. Nakouzi. Mr. President, so the words that were said attributing to the White House or the American position about disappointment in Prime Minister Maliki is not true? You are not disappointed in Prime Minister Maliki and this Iraqi Government yet?

The President. I strongly support Prime Minister Maliki. Again, there's a lot of gossip here, as well as overseas. One of the jobs that I have to continue to do is constantly repeat what—the position of my Government. And the position of my Government is that Prime Minister Maliki is a good man who is working hard, and we strongly support him.

But it's not just Prime Minister Maliki that we support; we also support President Talabani or Vice President Al-Mahdi or Vice President Hashimi. We support those who are committed to peace and committed to the welfare of the Iraqi people. And we support those who are willing to take on these extremists, the few who are murdering innocent people in order to create chaos and confusion inside of Iraq. Again, I repeat, the situation is not perfect, but our country is not perfect. And I'm proud of the courage of the Iraqi citizens.

The Iraqis have been through a lot of bloodshed and violence, and yet they're still strong in their desire to achieve. The Iraqis will be successful.

Lebanese Elections

Mr. Nakouzi. Mr. President, let's move to Lebanon. And a lot of Lebanese are waiting. You have met with Mr. Sa'ad Hariri today, and they are all talking about the upcoming elections in Lebanon that could or could not happen. Does President Bush have

a specific, preferred candidate in Lebanon that you wanted to support for the Presidency of Lebanon? Is there going to be elections in Lebanon that will take place?

The President. No, I have no specific candidate, and I told that to Sa'ad Hariri. I have a deep desire to help the Lebanese democracy succeed. I am deeply concerned about foreign interference into the Presidential election. I am concerned that neighboring countries will try to create instability so that this democracy doesn't succeed, just like I'm deeply concerned that there's been murder on the streets of Beirut, including Sa'ad Hariri's dad, and that the international community must follow through in an expeditious way—must follow through quickly in holding—in having an international tribunal, so that those who murdered—so that the facts come out and those who murdered would be held to account.

There's just too many Parliamentarians who are trying to work for a peaceful Lebanon being assassinated. And we need to know who is doing that assassinations. And when they're found out, they need to be held to account; there needs to be a consequence. And the international community has been too slow in getting the international tribunal moving.

Thirdly, I told Sa'ad Hariri that I sent one of our top military men into Lebanon to help them modernize their armed forces. And the reason I felt comfortable doing that is because Prime Minister Siniora showed courage and had—as did the Lebanese forces when they went out to rout out some extremists who were causing chaos or trying to cause chaos in Lebanon. And yet it became apparent to me that this military was full of courageous people but didn't have the modern equipment necessary to defend the country from extremists and/or extremists who had been funded from outside influence.

This is a very difficult situation. I'm hopeful that, obviously, the Presidency will be resolved and that a unified government can move forward. Sa'ad Hariri shared with me the strategy of the March 14th coalition, and I was more than willing to listen. I assured him and I assure the Lebanese people that we want to help you succeed.

Syrian Involvement in Lebanon

Mr. Nakouzi. Mr. President, are we able to say today, for example, to the Lebanese people—and we know that the United States is the most powerful constituency in Lebanon—can we say to the Lebanese people that you, specifically, Mr. President, will prevent any foreign interference in Lebanon that could be imposed from the outside and have a President that is being promoted by outside force?

The President. I think maybe that's a promise that I'm not sure I could keep, because the one thing that we did was, we worked with France to pass a U.N. resolution to get Syria, Syrian presence, visible presence, out of Lebanon. However, I suspect that there's still a lot of Syrian influence in Lebanon that is not helpful. And one way to make it clear to the Asad Government that we don't appreciate this is for the United States to—is to analyze the sanctions we've placed on the Government and think about other ways to continue to send a message and to work with our friends, particularly in Europe, to send the same message. In other words, there has to be a consequence for continued involvement.

And the other thing is, is that I think it's going to be an important signal to send—is this tribunal. The international community said we ought to have a tribunal. I'm frustrated, frankly, by the pace at which the tribunal is lingering—it's not moving. There needs to be a definitive moment where the evidence is laid out, and if it's clear evidence—in other words, if somebody's guilty, they ought to be held to account so that murder is not—so that there's this clear signal that murder is not going to be accepted. The brave souls of Lebanon who are being killed—Sa'ad Hariri's dad was one, blown up, murdered. Why? Because he supported democracy. Lebanese democracy is for freedom.

And that ought to send a clear message to people throughout the world that it is so important for those of us who live in free societies to support brave people who are promoting liberty. This man wanted nothing more than the Lebanese mom to be able to raise her child in peace. And yet somebody ordered or somebody followed through with

coldblooded murder to deny those dreams for the Lebanese people. And the same thing is happening in Iraq, and it's unacceptable behavior.

And the United States is firm in its desire to help the average citizen in the Middle East live in peace. It just so happens a peaceful Middle East will make America more secure. So we have common interests. And that's really what I want the people in the Middle East to hear, that each issue is an issue that's got difficult problems, but there's an interconnection. Extremists want to stop freedom, though. And we want—we want you to live in peace. And we respect your religion, and we respect your humanity. And our desire for you is to realize your full potential, God-given potential.

Peace in the Middle East

Mr. Nakouzi. Mr. President, of course I cannot conclude this interview without asking the most important question, that is the issue of Palestine. Is President Bush convinced, truly convinced inside, that it is possible yet to achieve peace between Israel and Palestine? Can we achieve the two states, living side by side, and not as two enemies but two friends? Is it possible or is it difficult or impossible to achieve?

The President. I believe in my soul, in my heart, that not only is it necessary that there be two states living side by side in order to achieve peace, but it's possible. I'm very optimistic we can achieve a two-state solution.

First, Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas are committed to a two-state solution and are making progress. We've done a lot of dialog between the two men, and they are making progress. And they're making progress that—I believe—where the average Palestinian and average Israeli will begin to see what a vision looks like; in other words, something to work for, something that's more tangible than just a Rose Garden speech by the President or hopeful comments by others—something real.

Secondly, that—you know, we're hosting a international conference that will be attended by interested parties—the Arab League, you know, important Arab League group will be there; a committee will be

there from the Arab League. And it's an opportunity for there to be a serious—substantive discussions about the way forward and a two-state solution. A lot of it is going to be empower both parties, give them confidence to follow through on the vision.

I also want you to know that I fully understand the two-state solution is a part of a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, and that our strategy is to get all concerned countries to the table; to get this comprehensive peace moving forward in a way that is tangible and real, so people can see it. In other words, I'm not interested in just a photo opportunity, and I don't think anybody else is going to be interested in that. I really want to see if we can advance the progress.

Step one was for there to be a commitment by Israel and the Palestinians to this peace. And step two is a commitment to the road-map. In other words, nobody is going to want—have a state that becomes a launching pad for attack. The Palestinians—the average Palestinian doesn't want that, and surely the Abbas Government doesn't, and Israel can't stand that.

And so we've got—we got to work a lot with the Palestinians to help their security forces—and we are—and to help the President and the Prime Minister with economic aid, tangible economic aid so the average Palestinian can see a better life ahead, can realize there's something better than violence. And so I am very optimistic about it, about the prospects for peace.

War on Terror

Mr. Nakouzi. Steven told me that time is over, Mr. President. Could you just—a few seconds, if you allow me. And since I wanted to go ask you that question when we, after—20 days after commemorating September 11th, I said, when I meet President Bush, I'm going to ask him a question. This massacre that happened on 9/11, it is very difficult for any Arab who lives in the Arab world that can imagine what happened to innocent American people on that day.

I would like to know what was your reaction the first time when you heard that 15 Saudi Muslims were among the hijackers who committed this crime and this terrorist act? How did that affect your relationship

with the Kingdom—which plays a major role in the region—and particularly Crown Prince Abdallah—now King Abdallah—who is a personal friend of yours?

The President. King Abdallah is a personal friend of mine, and I respect him. You know, I have seen murder before in my own country. I have seen evil people take innocent life. And when that's happened, I haven't condemned everybody else around.

I will give you an interesting story. I was in a community yesterday—a gunman came and killed five young Amish girls—this is last year. And the gunman was killed. The Amish community, which is a religious community here in America, went and reached out to the wife and children of the gunman in compassion and love. And I'm not saying I was that—you know, I hope I could be that compassionate. It was a great act of compassion.

And the reason I tell you that is, my reaction on September the 11th was, I vowed to find the killers—those who ordered the killing—and bring them to justice. On the other hand, never did it enter my heart and my mind to be embittered toward a group of people, innocent people, who had nothing to do with the murderer. In other words, I was focused on the individuals and their commanders, not citizens in the Middle East, of any country, particularly Saudi Arabia.

In other words, my first reaction was not, look, the Saudis are bad people. My first reaction was, evil people came and killed, and we'll react to protect ourselves. And we'll react to protect ourselves in two ways. One is to work with concerned governments, including Saudi Arabia, to find those few that are willing to murder us. And those same murderers that came to the United States would very much like to murder the leaders in Saudi Arabia. And so there's a lot of common ground throughout the world to rout out people and to bring them to justice.

And the long term—these people believe something. There's an ideology behind their views, and the ideology basically is very different from one based upon freedom. Their ideology is, you can't worship the way you see fit. And if you don't worship the way they want you to worship, you'll be publicly beaten, or you'll be killed, or you'll be in prison. They don't believe, for example, young girls

ought to be educated. I strongly disagree with that. I think one of the great potentials of the Middle East is women. And I certainly know, as a father, that I want my little girls to be—you know, have a good education, which they did. And I'm confident other fathers want the same thing in the Middle East, even though we may not speak the same language or share the same religion.

And so my reaction was—tough reaction to make sure we find those who ordered the killing and bring them to justice and to keep the pressure on them so they don't do it again—and I believe they want to do it again. But on the other hand, I have this sense of a possibility based upon something that's worked throughout the world, and that is, people being able to realize dreams through liberty.

This isn't the first time that societies have had to make choices. This isn't the first time where people made the focused effort to become a free society. And it won't be the first time when a part of the world has gone from one that's been tense and full of unspeakable tragedy to one of peace.

And that's where we're headed; we're headed to peace. And I can't thank you enough for the opportunity to speak on a free channel to people throughout the Middle East. Our country is a loving country. It's hard for me to believe that people can't look at America and say, "Wow, what a compassionate group of people"—because we are. And yet I understand the images of my country have been distorted. And I understand people say things about me personally that simply aren't true. And so I appreciate the chance to come and talk to you directly and to talk to your viewers directly about what's in my heart and about the fact that my country is a country of peace.

Mr. Nakouzi. Mr. President, on behalf of myself and Al Arabiya TV, I would like to thank you very much for this opportunity. You were very generous with us on time; I know you have a very hectic schedule.

Thank you very much for this opportunity. And I hope to meet with you again when you also are in a position to achieve some of our democracy in our region. Thank you, sir.

NOTE: The interview began taping at 11:35 a.m. in the Oval Office and continued on the Colonnade and in the Map Room at the White House, for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to President Mahmud Ahmadinejad of Iran; Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, President Jalal Talabani, and Vice Presidents Adil Abd Al-Mahdi and Tariq al-Hashimi of Iraq; Parliament Member Sa'ad Hariri and Prime Minister Fuad Siniora of Lebanon; President Bashar al-Assad of Syria; Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel; President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad of the Palestinian Authority; and King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia. Portions of Mr. Nakouzi's remarks were in Arabic, and an English translation was provided. This transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 5. A tape was not available for verification of this interview.

Remarks on the National Economy and Homeland Security

October 5, 2007

I want to thank members of my economic team for coming into the Oval Office this morning to bring some good news here for America's families and America's working people. The—last month, our economy added 110,000 new jobs. And that's good news for people here in our country. It's an indicator that this economy is a vibrant and strong economy.

The folks briefed me on the fact that they are—numbers for July and August were revised—the job numbers, job creation numbers. And this economy added 118,000 new jobs in July and August as well. This means—with these revisions, it means that we've had 49 consecutive months of job creation. And that's the longest uninterrupted job growth on record for our country.

You know, I am really pleased with the economic news, but I don't take good news for granted. I understand people are worried about their mortgage payments or concerned about sending their child to college. I know that people are concerned whether or not they're going to have enough money to meet their needs. And so my call to the United States Congress is, keep taxes low. If you want this economy continue to grow and if you want to reinforce the fact that we've

got—entrepreneurship is strong and people are working, don't raise taxes.

And I'm looking forward to working with the Congress to set priorities on how we spend the people's money. But I also am going to make it very clear to people in Congress that we're not going to raise the taxes on the working people.

And so I'm real pleased. I thank you all for coming in to bring this good news to me. It's—this good news is a real tribute to the hard-working Americans, the people out there working hard to put food on the table. And it's a tribute to the entrepreneurial spirit of the country.

I want to say something else. There's been a lot of talk in the newspapers and on TV about a program that I put in motion to detain and question terrorists and extremists. I have put this program in place for a reason, and that is to better protect the American people. And when we find somebody who may have information regarding an—a potential attack on America, you bet we're going to detain them, and you bet we're going to question them, because the American people expect us to find out information, actionable intelligence so we can help them, help protect them. That's our job.

Secondly, this Government does not torture people. You know, we stick to U.S. law and our international obligations.

Thirdly, there are highly trained professionals questioning these extremists and terrorists. In other words, we got professionals who are trained in this kind of work to get information that will protect the American people. And by the way, we have gotten information from these high-value detainees that have helped protect you.

And finally, the techniques that we use have been fully disclosed to appropriate Members of the United States Congress. The American people expect their Government to take action to protect them from further attack. And that's exactly what this Government is doing, and that's exactly what we'll continue to do.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:54 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.