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Interview With Nadia Bilbassy Charters of MBC TV

December 5, 2008

The Oval Office

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Mr. President, nice to see you always.

The President. Welcome, welcome.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Thank you very much. Thank you, sir.

The President. We are glad you're here.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Thank you very much.

The President. Come on in to the Oval Office.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. We are grateful for this. Thank you. This is great.

The President. It's an interesting history here, and I kind of think one thing that your viewers might be interested in knowing is that the first decision I ever made as President—but I was actually President-elect—was, what color rug do you want? And one of the important things is to surround yourself with people who you can trust, and delegate. In this case, I delegated the rug design to Laura, my wife.

But I told her, I said, I want the rug to have a message, and that is "optimistic guy goes to work here." And so, as you can see, the rug really lights up the room. And I am optimistic about the future of the Middle East.

Freedom Agenda/Middle East

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Well, that's a great note, sir. You've been here 8 years. A few weeks and you're going to be leaving.

The President. I'm going home.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. You sat on this desk for 8 years, and you took many decisions regarding our region. You launched the greater Middle East initiative that you want to democratize, reform the Middle East. In retrospect, do you think that vision was realized? Would you do anything differently?

The President. Well, I think it began—it's the beginning of a very difficult vision to implement. But I felt it was necessary for a couple of important reasons. One, I believe we're in an ideological struggle against people who want to achieve their ideological vision through the use of violence and murder. And I believe it is essential that you have an alternative available for people; the one I happen to believe in is based upon liberty. I don't think this is an American vision, see. And I tell people this, that I do believe there is a universal God, and a gift of that Almighty to all of us, whether we be Methodists or Muslims or nothing, is freedom. And so freedom is a great alternative.

But I also believe there's a moral calling. If you believe there's an Almighty God, and a gift of that Almighty to everybody is freedom, then I think you have to—if you can do something about it, that you have to act on that, so that moms can grow up in a society that is hopeful for their children, you know, that their children are—can realize dreams.

And to me the best type of society to do that is freedom. But it's very hard; it's difficult. And so you have to plant a seed, and you have to cultivate the seed, and eventually the crops will bloom. And we're beginning to see the crops beginning to bloom in parts of the Middle East.

War on Terror

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Sir, some people say that the war on terror is a war on Islam.

The President. Yes.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Yet you went to the first mosque after 9/11, and you spoke there. How do you convince people in the Middle East that George Bush is not fighting a war against Islam?

The President. No, I know, and it troubles my soul, because I believe we're all God's children. And I hear people say, "George Bush doesn't like Muslims; he wants to fight Muslims." And, first, I thank you for giving me the chance to, hopefully, set the record straight. But I am objecting to anybody who murders innocent people to achieve their objectives. I don't think people who murder in the name of religion are truly religious people. And secondly, I would hope that people would know that when we try to use some of our influence to help on education programs, for example, or we welcome students, Saudi students, to the United States to study here, that it's a sign of respect and a sign of my desire to reach out to all people regardless of their religion.

Reflections on the President's Time in Office

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Absolutely. I wanted also to ask you about, in the last 8 years, if you look back, would you do things differently? Would you have done things that you probably thought for a second—for the second time, I would have done them a different way?

The President. I'm sure there will be. I mean, there's been some disappointments.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Like what?

The President. Well, like, Abu Ghraib was a terrible disappointment. And admittedly, I wasn't there on the site, but I was the Commander in Chief of a military where these disgraceful acts took place that sent the absolute wrong image about America and our military.

You know, parts of Iraq—it's taken longer than I thought it would. On the other hand, I am pleased to see a multiethnic society begin to emerge. I talked to the leaders of Iraq yesterday and today and congratulated them on doing some hard work. And I love to hear their spirit in their voice.

And so I'm confident history will say, "Oh, Bush could have done it better here," or, "Bush could have done it better there." But I think from the strategic point of view, I'm confident that the idea of moving liberty in the region, a two-state solution to help the Israeli-Palestinian issue, the liberation of Iraq, and the followup with the—to help the Iraqis realize their sovereignty—a strong push-back against Iran—I believe when people objectively analyze this administration, they'll say, "Well, I see now what he was trying to do."

Middle East Peace Process

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. I mean, the Arab peace initiative, it was a framework. Do you think that President-elect Obama should use it in terms of achieving peace in the Middle East?

The President. I definitely think it was a major breakthrough for then Crown Prince, now His Majesty, King Abdallah, to take the initiative and lay out the conditions for peace. And it is, I think, a useful foundation to help solve a longstanding problem. I do believe there will be a Palestinian state. I feel comfortable in saying that the decision—my decision to promote a Palestinian state, being the first President to do so, was the right thing for peace—right thing for peace for the Palestinians, right thing for peace for the Israelis. And His Majesty was very useful and very bold in laying out the Arab peace initiative.

The Rose Garden

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. We're going to talk about all this in details so——

The President. Yes, come on, I'll show you the Rose Garden.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. ——let's walk and talk as we go down to the Map Room.

The President. You've seen the Rose Garden before.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. I have, many times.

The President. Many times. [*Laughter*]

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Thank you, sir. It's beautiful.

The President. It is a beautiful day.

The Presidency

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. What are you going to miss most about this place?

The President. Well, you know, I'll miss a lot. I am—I've got such respect for our military, and I admire people in our military so very much. I'll miss being the Commander in Chief. But, you know, the White House is full of incredibly gracious and kind people who work hard to make family life as normal as possible. And so I'll miss a lot of the people we work with here.

Post-Presidency Plans

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. And what's your plans?

The President. Well, I'm going to move back to Texas.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. And what are you going to do there?

The President. And I'm going to, you know, write a book, I think, about what it was like to be President and some of the hard decisions I had to make. I'm going to start a institute that will promote freedom. And this will be an interesting place, particularly in regards to the Middle East, because this will be a place where there will be a forum

for people with different issues to come and discuss.

You know, I would love to have, you know, Palestinians, such as the President or the Prime Minister, to come and describe to the Americans what it was like to be in that part of the world. Or you know, there's just a lot of really interesting opportunities for people to come and lecture and think and talk.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. And in your book, obviously, we're talking about foreign policy. Most of it happened in the Middle East—okay, we're off camera now. I hope the guy is okay.

The President. A lot of—yes. He fell into the Rose Garden.

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

Middle East Peace Process/West Bank

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Mr. President, thank you very much for this exclusive interview with us——

The President. Thank you.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. ——and thank you very much for granting us, to MEBC, and to me, personally, on behalf of Arab media. I really do appreciate it; I'm very grateful.

The President. Thank you. I've enjoyed working with you. You've been a very fair journalist, and it's been a pleasure to have known you.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Thank you, sir. You are the first American President to call for the establishment of a Palestinian state. You had hoped that you would have this state realized when you leave office. Do you think that you could have done more? Do you think that you have thrown all of the weight of the U.S. behind this vision?

The President. Absolutely, we threw all the muscle and all the weight of the United States behind the vision. I am—you know, I wish there would have been a clearly defined state by the time I left office. However, I do take comfort in a couple of things.

One, the attitude toward a Palestinian state has shifted. I think there's universal recognition in the region that in order for there to be peace, there must be two states living side by side in peace. Secondly, I am pleased that Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas, after Annapolis, have worked very hard to narrow the differences on a variety of issues. And they have; they've made substantial progress.

Thirdly, I am pleased that there is the Arab peace plan, which is an essential part of creating the conditions for a Palestinian state to evolve. Fourthly, I'm grateful that at the Annapolis conference all Arab nations were represented, which is an important signal, because I learned a lesson in studying previous efforts for peace that there must be regional buy-in. In other words, the nations in the region must stand with the Palestinians, in particular, and say this is—we support you.

And so—and fifthly, by the way, I am pleased with the progress being made to help the development of an infrastructure in the West Bank. Prime Minister Fayyad has asked for help. A lot of nations are helping, including the United States; we're helping with security measures. Generals Dayton and Jones have been very helpful. My friend Prime Minister Blair—former Prime Minister Blair, who was here the other night for dinner—and I talked about the economics that are beginning to take place in the region. In other words, a state can be defined on paper, but it also has to be defined in a civil society and a strong economy. And it's beginning to happen.

Middle East Peace Process/Gaza Strip

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. How do you see the Palestinian issue evolving in the next few years? I mean, Prime Minister Tony Blair said, actually, there's no peace without Gaza, and I guess that means Hamas as well. Do you share that vision?

The President. I share the vision that the only way there's going to be peace is where those who assume that violence is necessary to achieve peace cannot be a part of the process. In other words, people have to renounce violence in order to have peace. It's contradictory to say, I am going to use violence to achieve my objectives, and oh, by the way, I'm for peace.

And so, ultimately, Gaza has got to be—look, Gaza has to be a part of a Palestinian state, and the Palestinian state has to be contiguous territory; it cannot look like Swiss

cheese. And it's got to be a state in which the sovereignty of the Palestinian people is—reigns supreme.

Middle East Peace Process/Palestinian State

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. So you're confident it's going to emerge?

The President. I am. I really am. There will be fits and starts. I mean, if this were a straight line between vision and reality, it would have happened. But there's a lot of complicating factors. Obviously, the terrorists create complicating factors. Secondly, politics creates complicating factors, both within the Palestinians, as well as the Israelis, as we have seen.

But nevertheless, the foundation is there. People—if you give people a choice, ultimately give them a choice between two states side by side in peace or this unresolved dispute, what would they choose? They would choose peace. And this will happen.

Middle East Peace Process

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. What will President-elect Obama pick up from where you left?

The President. Well, I think we've left it in good shape. We've left it with the vision intact. In other words, a lot of people now share the vision of two states. As I say, there's been progress between the Israeli Prime Minister and the Palestinian President toward what a state should look like. I think the Israelis are getting—be more comfortable with the notion that a state won't create less security for them, but more security for them. And the Arab world, because of the Arab initiative as well as the Annapolis conference, are showing more and more willingness to be constructive partners in getting peace.

Saudi Arabia-U.S. Relations

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. The U.S. and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have a close strategic relationship. You, personally, have a very good working relationship with King Abdallah. Yet you don't see eye to eye on many issues. How did you resolve that?

The President. I think we do. I think we got—I think we agree more than we disagree. First of all, I hold His Majesty in high respect. I appreciate, for example, the religious dialog that he instigated, and I was honored to be invited to go to New York. I thought that was a very smart way to help promote understanding, and understanding eventually leads to peace.

He is a man who understands that terrorists can destroy his own society. And so I—I don't know if the world understands this or not, but Saudi Arabia has been very firm in dealing with Al Qaida. And remember, it was Al Qaida that tried to blow up their oil infrastructure; they killed their citizens. And His Majesty knows full well that that kind of terrorism cannot coexist with a peaceful society. When I have my discussions with him, I find there's a lot more common ground than not.

Saudi Arabia/Middle East Peace Process

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. So there's no disagreement with the Palestinian issue with what——

The President. I think His Majesty—look, the Arab peace initiative actually talks about, you know, Israel solving its problems with Lebanon and Syria and the Palestinians, and there will be universal recognition when that happens. And so to me that is a very positive statement. And that the idea of a Palestinian state as part—as far as being part of the solution to the overall problem is something I believe he agrees with. I don't want to put words in his mouth, because he's my dear friend.

Qatar

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. In the recent years, there was an emergence of Qatar as a regional player in many of the countries in the Middle East. Do you see that played on the—kind of at the expense of traditional allies of the U.S., like Saudi Arabia and Egypt?

The President. I think it's going to be very important for the initiatives instigated by Qatar to show results, for example, with Hamas. Now, Hamas—in my judgment, the violent wing of Hamas damages the prospects for a Palestinian state. Or with Hizballah—I believe that Hizballah is a very

destabilizing influence, particularly when they resort to violence.

So what I would look for, and do look for, and would hope the next President would look for is, okay, are these initiatives bearing fruit? We, of course, appreciate, you know, our basing agreement with Qatar, and we thank them very much for that. And we would hope that they would follow through to deliver the results for peace, which is what we all want, I hope.

Iraq

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. We're going to move to Iraq. Recently, the U.S. and the Iraqi Government have signed the status of forces agreement. What do you think of it?

The President. I think that the strategic framework agreement and the status of forces agreement is a sign that the Iraqi democracy is emerging and is healthy. There was a lot of debate on the SFA and SOFA, and there were people that were—you know, a lot of people were saying, well, this will be bad for Iraq, and others say this will be good for Iraq. And after the debate was over, it was ratified by the people's assembly, and I think that's a healthy sign. I also think it's very good to have an agreement in place that recognizes the sovereignty of Iraq and recognizes that the United States will be moving its forces out of cities and then eventually out of the country based upon success.

War on Terror

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. In retrospect, would you think that this war could be averted?

The President. We tried to avert it. I know people say, "Oh, George Bush likes to use the military." That's the hardest thing for a President to do, is to put soldiers in harm's way, because I knew what would happen. And, you know, that's of course manifested when I meet with mothers of fallen soldiers or wives or husbands. And it is incredibly sad, as I'm sure you can imagine, very emotional, to hug and to cry with families. And I've met with a lot of families—a lot—so I knew the consequences. I really did.

And I was hoping that through diplomatic pressure that we would be able to resolve this issue peacefully. And I remember—you can't take this Iraq out of the post-9/11 context. We'd been attacked, and here's a man who I have said repeatedly, you know, was not directly involved in 9/11, but had used weapons of mass destruction and had supported terror and had paid the families of suicide bombers and was a sworn enemy of the United States and had invaded two countries and had ignored, you know, 17 or however many resolutions in the United Nations. He was a threat.

But I did go to the United Nations, as you remember. Disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences, is what 1441 said. And I firmly believe the choice was Saddam Hussein's to make, and he made a fateful choice. Then the interesting point was, after he was removed, with a broad coalition of countries, what do we do? You know, do we pick a strong man and say, here's America's guy and put him in there? Or do we work so that the Iraqi citizens would be able to pick their own form of government and their own people? And that's what we chose to do, and it's been really hard.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Was it worth it?

The President. Absolutely. I believe a Middle East with Saddam Hussein in power today would be different, much different than the one today. I think you'd see a man with a lot of oil wealth willing to use terrorist connections to try to compete, for example, with Hizballah.

There could conceivably be a nuclear arms race taking place, while even though Saddam Hussein did not have nuclear weapons, it is certain, at least to the experts, that he still had the capacity to make nuclear weapons. And there would be nothing more destabilizing for the Middle East than to see Iran trying to develop a nuclear weapon and Iraq trying to develop a nuclear weapon.

So I think the Middle East is a much better place without Saddam Hussein in power, and the sacrifices by both the Iraqi people and the coalition forces to achieve where we are today.

Iran

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. But some say, sir, that the removal of Saddam Hussein has bolstered Iran and make emergent as a regional superpower.

The President. I disagree completely with that. I think the emergence of a democratic and stable Iraq on Iran's border is in the—will help more likely keep the peace vis-a-vis Iran in the Middle East.

Secondly, what has changed with Iran is universal recognition about the dangers of Iran having a—the capacity to make a nuclear weapon. And therefore, one of the objectives of my administration is to create an international coalition all saying the same thing, which is, you have defied the IAEA, therefore, you cannot be trusted to say that you're only enriching for civilian nuclear power; therefore, stop your process, verify they stopped their enrichment process; otherwise, there will continue to be international sanctions.

Iran-U.S. Relations

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. The Iranian—recently your administration has been involved diplomatically with the Iranians. Do you think that actually you can bring them to the international fold by engaging them diplomatically?

The President. We're trying to—we've offered them a way forward; it's verifiably suspend your enrichment. And we will be at the table with other nations.

And so, well, we discussed Iraq with Iran in a regional context. But we have said there is—if you want to have diplomatic relations and discussions with the United States, verifiably suspend your enrichment program. Our objective is to stop their gain of knowledge that would enable them to build a nuclear weapon, because having a nuclear weapon would be incredibly destabilizing to the region.

And so there is a way forward for them to have diplomacy. But it's their choice, and thus far, they have not chosen to do it. And I regret that our relations are with Iran—are this way, because I have great respect for the Iranian people and the Iranian history. And I know that they can have a better future with the rest of the world, if their leadership were to abandon its desire to learn how to build a nuclear weapon.

Syria

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. I have a few questions about just Syria and Lebanon, but my time is over.

The President. Well, thank you for your—you're a beautiful interviewer.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Thank you, sir. So can I go ahead?

The President. Quickly. And then I really do have to go.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Sure, absolutely. I wanted to talk about Syria. Basically, the U.S. attacked Syria. But do you see——

The President. The U.S.——

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. ——attacked Syria recently. There was a target inside Syria that was attacked by——

The President. Allegedly, yes.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Allegedly. But do you see this kind of tension will succeed soon, or do you see the U.S. diplomatically engaged in Syria?

The President. First of all, we discussed no operations. Secondly, we have engaged Syria early in my administration with Secretary Colin Powell and others. And our message was, if you'd like to have better relations with us, stop housing Hamas, violent Hamas; stop destabilizing the democracy of Lebanon; stop facilitating the flow of terrorists into Iraq; be a constructive neighbor to countries, and we can have better relations. And they have, thus far, chosen to do that. Again, there is a way forward.

But my worry about just sitting down with people and hoping that they end up behaving differently is that oftentimes it reinforces behavior that is not in our interests. And so I believe in conditional diplomacy. Now, there is a lot of multilateral diplomacy going on out of this administration. But in this case, just like Iran, we will have diplomatic relations if you choose, but there's got to be behavioral change in order to justify it.

Lebanon

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. And can you stabilize Lebanon?

The President. I've been trying to—one of the great successes has been to get 30,000 or so Syrian troops out of Lebanon. I think one of the real keys to peace in the Middle

East is Lebanon. And Lebanon is a democracy. I've met their President recently here in the Oval Office, which—had a very a good discussion. I've been very impressed by Prime Minister Siniora's courage and boldness. We want to help Lebanon have an armed forces that are effective, so that they can protect their people. And we have been working very hard for 7 years to free Lebanon as much as possible from foreign interference, so that its democracy can grow and mature and be a stable contributor to the region.

President's Legacy in the Middle East

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. How would you like the people in the Middle East to remember you?

The President. I would hope they would remember me as George W. Bush, as a man who respects their religion, respects human rights and human dignity, and prays for peace.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Thank you very much. Thank you for your time. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview began taping at 1 p.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 King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia; President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel; Lt. Gen. Keith W. Dayton, USA, U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority; Gen. James L. Jones, USMC (Ret.), Special Envoy for Middle East Security; former Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom, Quartet Representative in the Middle East; former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell; and President Michel Sleiman and Prime Minister Fuad Siniora of Lebanon. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 7. A portion of this interview could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Memorandum on Suspension of Limitations Under the Jerusalem Embassy Act

December 4, 2008

Presidential Determination No. 2009–8

Memorandum for the Secretary of State

Subject: Suspension of Limitations Under the Jerusalem Embassy Act

Pursuant to the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, including section 7(a) of the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995 (Public Law 104–45) (the "Act"), I hereby determine that it is necessary, in order to protect the national security interests of the United States, to suspend for a period of 6 months the limitations set forth in sections 3(b) and 7(b) of the Act.

You are hereby authorized and directed to transmit this determination to the Congress, accompanied by a report in accordance with section 7(a) of the Act, and to publish the determination in the *Federal Register*.

This suspension shall take effect after transmission of this determination and report to the Congress.

George W. Bush

[Filed with the Office of the Federal Register, 8:45 a.m., December 16, 2008.]

NOTE: This memorandum was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 8, and it will be published in the *Federal Register* on December 17.

Remarks at the Children's Holiday Reception

December 8, 2008

The President. Welcome to the White House.

Children. Thank you.

The President. Yes! We're excited you are here. And we're excited you're here for a couple of reasons. One, we love to see the wonder in people's eyes when they get to see the majesty of the White House at this time of year. And I'm looking in your eyes, and I'm seeing wonder.