

**Interview of Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas A. Shannon
with Algerian state-run TV's reporter Ismahane Moumeni**

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Ismahane Moumeni: Dear viewers, welcome to “Special Interview.” Our guest tonight is U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas A. Shannon. Welcome Mr. Shannon and thank you for accepting the interview request of Algerian TV.

U/S Shannon: Than you.

Ismahane Moumeni: My first question is about your visit to Algeria. What is your assessment of the visit? Have you achieved the goals expected?

U/S Shannon: Thank you very much for the question and thank you for allowing me to talk to you today. First of all, this is my first trip to Algeria, and I am very happy to be here. Algeria, historically, has been a very important country for me because of its history but also because of the influence of two intellectuals on my life Albert Camus and Saint Augustine. Both were born in Algeria. So, I am happy to be here. I think my visit has been an important one for the United States. We are anticipating some very important conversations at very high levels. Your Prime Minister will be travelling to Washington to meet with our President for the nuclear security summit and we are going to have our Strategic Dialogue here in April in Algiers. So, I am here as part of the effort to expand the dialogue we are having and identify the issues that we are going to be addressing.

Ismahane Moumeni: Mr. Shannon, your visit to Algeria is part of a tour that includes other North African and Sahel countries as well as Burkina Faso and Mali. Why now? And why these specific countries?

U/S Shannon: This is my first visit since I was confirmed by the U.S. Senate to be the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. And in the United States we understand the importance of North Africa and the Sahel. The two parts of Africa link in security purposes and in economic and social development. And so the purpose of this trip is to highlight the importance of the Maghreb countries and the Sahel countries as a region.

Ismahane Moumeni: Sahel and North African countries are witnessing some security tensions. Mr. Shannon, is there any U.S.-Algerian security coordination to contain these tensions and terrorism that is expanding in these regions?

U/S Shannon: Algeria and the United States have a strategic partnership. And an important part of that partnership is security, counterterrorism, fighting organized crime, narcotics trafficking, and trafficking of people. Since the beginning of the

strategic partnership, we have deepened and enhanced that cooperation. And Algeria is a very important partner. I will give you just one example. What Algeria is doing in Mali and its ability to negotiate the Algiers Accord is a tremendous diplomatic feat, but it has also created a framework in which all the countries of the region can help Mali attempt to achieve internal peace.

Ismahane Moumeni: U.S.-Algerian Strategic Dialogue has reached its fourth year. What impact has the Strategic Dialogue had on bilateral relations, counterterrorism, and coordination for international issues of common interest?

U/S Shannon: What the Strategic Dialogue has done is first expand the issues that we are engaging on and moving beyond security and counterterrorism to commerce, investment, and other kinds of cooperation. But it is also raising the level of the engagement. And we have had regular engagement between our leaders, between our Secretary of State and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and between high-level officials in our government. So, it means we are enhancing the quantity and the breadth of our engagement but we are also increasing the quality.

Ismahane Moumeni: My next question is about Libya. Libya is attempting to overcome its crisis and there are international efforts to help Libya put an end to the security crisis and the political deadlock, but recently the United States conducted a surprising airstrike on Libya. Do you not think that the U.S. strike will have a negative impact of these efforts?

U/S Shannon: Thank you very much for the question. It is important for me to clarify a few things. First, we are completely committed to a political solution to Libya's crisis and my government is working very hard to ensure that the UN and other partners that are working with Libya, including Algeria, are successful in helping Libya solve its political crisis, establish a government of national accord, agree on the cabinet, see the government in Tripoli, and work with the government of Libya to ensure that it has the capabilities and capacities necessary to fight terrorism in its own territory. Let me clear about the strike. It was targeted at a well-known Daesh operative. He was a Tunisian who participated in attacks in Tunisia, at the Bardo Museum and at the resort in Sousse, and he was training Tunisians who were almost certainly going to launch attacks in Tunisia. So, the strike was a counter-Daesh, counter-ISIL strike, conducted for those purposes only. It was not an intervention in Libyan internal affairs.

Ismahane Moumeni: Mr. Shannon, when you decided to conduct this strike that targeted this terrorist who was training terrorists to launch attacks in Tunisia, was it a unilateral strike or did you coordinate the strike with Libya's neighbors? If yes, what country/countries?

U/S Shannon: Let me say that the strike was consistent with international law. I will not go into details about the diplomatic conversations that we had, but I can say

that, from our point of view, the strike was conducted in complete compliance with international law.

Ismahane Moumeni: How was the strike in compliance with international law?

U/S Shannon: International law requires us to act in concert with national authorities. We did so.

Ismahane Moumeni: Was the strike a success?

U/S Shannon: We believe it was.

Ismahane Moumeni: Some countries condemned the attack including Libya whose government said that the strike violated Libya's sovereignty and international law. What is your comment on this, Mr. Shannon?

U/S Shannon: As I noted earlier, we believe this action is consistent with international law and standards. We believe it was necessary because of the danger posed by the individuals. And we believe that if we had not undertaken the strike, this particular Daesh operative and this group of trainees would have conducted a series of terrorist actions, which would have been quite terrible.

Ismahane Moumeni: Does it mean that the United States is ready to conduct strikes on any terrorist strongholds in Libya. Was it a prelude to other strikes? Or was it the last one?

U/S Shannon: It was not the first strike, but I do not know if it will be the last. This depends on factors that I cannot predict at this time. But let me underscore, our goal along with the goal of the United Nations, with Algeria, and with other partners is to help Libya resolve its political crisis, create a government of national accord, and then work with that government to build the capabilities of Libyan institutions to address security problems inside of Libya. All of us are working toward the same end, which is a healthy, capable Libya.

Ismahane Moumeni: Recently, international media reported that Western countries are planning to conduct a military operation against Daesh in Libya. Are these reports credible? If yes, when will the military operation take place?

U/S Shannon: Obviously, we are very worried about the presence of Daesh in Libya. Daesh is very a dangerous group and it does not have the interests of Libya or the Libyan people in mind when it builds its presence inside of Libya. However, it would be a mistake for me to anticipate what we might do as part of a larger counter-Daesh coalition to address the presence of Daesh in Libya. What is more important is to focus on Libya's capabilities to address that problem and that is where our diplomatic efforts are going to be.

Ismahane Moumeni: Mr. Shannon, the last question about the so-called Daesh or about terrorist groups in general. Do you not think that time and experience have shown that military strikes, like what happened in Syria and Libya, do not solve problems, but complicate things and contribute to the creation and expansion of terrorist groups?

U/S Shannon: A good point and an interesting question. We believe that in well-defined circumstances, with a well-identified target, and understanding the intention of the target to commit terrorist attacks, the airstrikes are justified. And we believe that in this instance we have accomplished the purpose of that. But let me return to the bigger question. Whether it is in Libya, whether it is in Syria, whether it is in Iraq, air campaigns can play a role but ultimately you address these problems by finding political solutions that allow governments to form, to build capabilities, and to address problems themselves. That has been our strategy in Iraq, that is our strategy in Libya, and in Syria what we have been trying to do is build a ceasefire that will stop the fighting and will allow a political negotiation to take place between the opposition and the government that will then create a political transition that will allow the Syrian state to fight ISIL. Our purpose is always to enable and help states and governments fight terrorism.

Ismahane Moumeni: Mr. Shannon, I have a question about the issue of Western Sahara. The UN secretary General Ban Ki-moon will visit the region next month. Do you not think that after 40 years, the time has come to end this conflict, in compliance with international law and address the aspirations of the Sahrawi people for self-determination?

U/S Shannon: The United States is committed to a peaceful, negotiated, enduring solution to the issue of Western Sahara. We support the UN process. We support the Secretary General in his efforts to find a solution. And we support the efforts of Ambassador Chris Ross, who is the Special Envoy for this problem. Forty years is a long time. We all recognize that, but we believe that we need to work even harder to convince all sides that there is a peaceful solution to this that respects the interests of all sides, but especially respects the interests of the people of Western Sahara. And so we will continue to work with the UN and with our partners in the region to find a solution to this, and we will not be deterred by the amount of time it is taking.

Ismahane Moumeni: Mr. Shannon, you were blamed for your statement during your visit to Morocco. You said that Morocco's proposal is balanced and now you are speaking about a political solution and that the United States supports the UN solution. Do you not think that the United States is having double standards toward this issue?

U/S Shannon: No [laughter], I don't. I say that because what the UN Secretary General is attempting to do and what Ambassador Ross is attempting to do find a way to blend interests and meet the concerns of all the parties involved. That means

that everybody needs to put forward balanced proposals. And so this was an effort to encourage all sides to understand that in negotiations you only get when you give.

Ismahane Moumeni: Of course.

Ismahane Moumeni: My last question Mr. Shannon. Algeria is the most stable country in a volatile region. What is your opinion about Algeria's role in the region and the efforts of President Bouteflika to export peace and stability to Mali and Libya?

U/S Shannon: First, Algeria is a great nation and the relationship between Algeria and the United States is only becoming better and only becoming more important for both countries. That is why we have a strategic partnership and a strategic dialogue. As we look to what Algeria is doing in the region, we admire its respect for sovereignty, we admire its ability to work diplomatically in the region, we admire its commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes, but we also admire what Algeria is attempting to do internally in a time of economic crisis to undertake important reforms, invite foreign investors into your country, make Algeria not just an important producer of goods for Algeria but also an important platform for export in the region. So, from our point of view, Algeria is only becoming a more important and more dynamic partner of Africa, of the Mediterranean, and of the Middle East. And as we look at and anticipate Algeria's success, we want to be part of it. And we want to be part of its economic and commercial success, its economic and social development, but we also to participate with Algeria as it works with its partners in the region to promote stability, prosperity, and peaceful resolution of disputes.

Ismahane Moumeni: Mr. Thomas Shannon, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, thank you very much for accepting our interview request and thank you for your time.

Ismahane Moumeni: Dear viewers, thank you for time and consideration. See you soon. Assalaamu alaykum.