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**Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov's Interview with Arab Media,
Moscow, March 15, 2006**

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Question: My question concerns the visit of the Hamas delegation to Moscow. First came the resounding invitation of President Putin, then your meeting with the delegation, and lastly, yesterday's event in Jericho. Will it influence your diplomatic efforts for resolving the Middle East crisis?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: As to the Hamas visit to Moscow, I believe this first contact was useful. After Hamas had won in legitimate, democratic, free and fair elections and received a majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council, there were no grounds not to forge contacts with this organization, which must become conscious of its responsibility for the fate of the Palestinian people. Particularly since throughout its previous activity, apart from the armed struggle - a form which we disapprove, just as we do violence from the other side - Hamas has been doing a lot to solve economic and social problems in the Palestinian territories. In many respects this found reflection in the vote of the voters who appreciate this role of Hamas.

I'll say straight away that Khaled Mashaal, who led the Hamas delegation, explicitly reiterated that the chief objectives of a government to be formed following the PLC elections would be tackling economic and social problems, mobilizing assistance to the Palestinians and ensuring the normal functioning of all life-support systems in the PNA areas. He also said the assistance coming in to Palestine, either via PNA's channels or those of Hamas, would entirely be used exactly for these purposes. Responding to my straightforward question, Mashaal expressed acceptance of a mechanism of independent international monitoring being set up which would guarantee that all the foreign aid is spent for civilian needs, for the needs of the population of Palestine, for the needs of the structures that ensure the life of Palestinians and is not used for other, nonpeaceful needs. We consider this an important statement. Now in contacts with the World Bank, with the office of James Wolfensohn and with the Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East we are striving to devise a mechanism which would reassure donors, as the donor community, especially in Europe, is interested in aid to Palestine continuing, not only in a humanitarian form, but also in the form of maintaining the Palestinian administrative structures on which the functioning of the Palestinian territories depends.

We also placed before the Hamas delegation the full range of questions touched upon in the well-known statement of the Quartet, and underscored the necessity of dealing with these matters, the need for Hamas to become a truly political force and legitimize its armed units by integrally incorporating them in PNA security structures. We stressed, of course, the Quartet's position on the need to recognize all existing Palestinian-Israeli accords and ensure a continuity in the negotiation process on settlement between the Palestinians and Israel, which, as you yourselves understand, presupposes the necessity to recognize Israel both as a negotiating party and as the state which upon completion of the peace process, under the Roadmap, must live side by side with the state of Palestine in peace and security. The Hamas delegation discussed with us the questions which I have just set out, the questions which were placed by the Quartet. We had not expected that the position of Hamas would make a U-turn overnight, but I would like to state the very important shifts which suggest the sense of responsibility of Hamas in its new capacity. First and foremost, it is readiness to consider the matters concerning the Roadmap. Moreover, our interlocutors quite justly stressed that if this theme was to be considered, then only in the form in which the Roadmap was approved by the Quartet. They recalled that Israel had made, I believe, 14 reservations concerning the Roadmap. The reservations are being viewed by the Palestinians as prejudging the outcome of the talks on a final status for the Palestinian territories, primarily with regard to borders, refugees, the status of Jerusalem and of settlements. To which we reminded our interlocutors of UN Security Council resolution 1515, which approved the Roadmap without any exemptions or amendments and exactly in the form in which it was agreed upon by the Quartet. So that I hope that the Hamas leaders are seriously studying the necessity to express their attitude towards the Roadmap.

We also expect Hamas to be able to join the well-known Arab Peace Initiative, which was formulated by the leadership of Saudi Arabia and then backed up at the Arab League summit in Beirut. As I understand another League summit will be held in Khartoum soon. The delegation of Hamas will be part of a delegation from Palestine, we expect. This would be extremely important to ensure from the very first days the engagement of a new government with President Abu Mazen. In this connection I will note that in Moscow the Hamas delegation said they respect Abu Mazen as the President, intend to develop cooperation with him, and recognize his powers, including those in international affairs. We count on cooperation between Abu Mazen and Hamas being arranged. In particular, we wish our Palestinian friends success in the soonest formation of a government and the completion of the elaboration of its program.

As to our further steps, we presume that the talks in Moscow were not a one-off action. We arrived at a definite understanding and want to see it embodied into life. For our part, we are ready to lend support to the Palestinians at this difficult stage. We are planning to provide financial aid to the Palestinians. Now we are agreeing the modalities in which this aid can be provided. We are also convinced that the Quartet at this stage should take no pause, but should formulate a strategy for its further actions in the new conditions so as to arrive at the fulfillment of the Roadmap. This is our principal concern, and we in the contacts with all the Quartet members that I had last week referred to this and expect that somewhere in the foreseeable couple of weeks we will be able to begin such work.

Regarding your specific question about the events that yesterday took place in Jericho. We are concerned by what happened and how this occurred. Now each of the parties is telling its own version of the incident. The UN Secretary General through his deputy Ibrahim Gambari

yesterday briefed the Security Council. This briefing appears to us objective. At any rate, the UN Secretariat usually tries when preparing briefings not to use unverified facts.

We are convinced that such incidents should be excluded. At the height of these events, we through our representatives in the region sent signals to the parties, including the Hamas leadership, calling for maximum restraint. Specifically we insistently recommended releasing the hostages and not succumbing to provocations. As far as I understand, all the hostages have been released and this matter is closed.

I know that Abu Mazen has returned to Ramallah. This is also important. His personal involvement in resolving this situation will have a great significance. Not all the circumstances of what happened are totally clear to us. We expect that they will be established and that irrespective of this both the Israelis and the Palestinians as well as the international observers who were involved in this process will show maximum responsibility and will not try to create any difficulties for subsequent efforts in the search for a course of action in this new, changed, far from easy situation. Each of the parties is, probably, tempted to exploit this or that episode for political purposes. That is an extremely dangerous game. We do not support any such things.

Question: How do you evaluate the outcome of the talks with the Iranians in Moscow and Teheran? In what stage is the project for setting up a JV for uranium enrichment on Russian soil? How could you respond to the views that the US is currently trying to remove Russia and the trio and begin direct talks with the Iranians on this question?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: The talks that were held during the last few weeks regularly enough in Moscow and Teheran between the Russian and Iranian sides, unfortunately, did not produce the result we had counted on. Our offer to establish on Russian soil a JV involving Iran which would in a guaranteed way supply all the requirements of Iran in fuel for its peaceful nuclear industry was made in a bid to agree a compromise package which would ensure a settlement of this problem. It was made in the context of the other component parts of the overall package, including the need for Iran to come back to the moratorium on activities related to uranium enrichment, the return by Iran to the regime of observance of the additional protocol, Iran's subsequent ratification of this protocol signed by it earlier, and of course, the necessity of continued work by inspectors from the IAEA to clear up the questions that still remain unclarified and which relate to the previous nuclear activities of Iran, which were generally closed to the world community, although they had to be reported to the IAEA. It was because of those previous activities that doubts arose among most IAEA members, which made it impossible to simply carry on work with Iran in the IAEA in the usual mode. This long eighteen-year period, when Iran did not report to the IAEA on its nuclear program, gave rise to many questions. The IAEA has already clarified a whole array of them, but a number of questions still remain. In order to restore confidence, these questions have to be resolved. After they have been clarified and confidence has been restored, we see no obstacles for Iran to continue to fully enjoy its rights as an NPT member. Such was our scheme, which the European countries shared, which was backed up by China and which the United States agreed with. But our Iranian colleagues, as you know, unlike the assurances they gave, including those in December of last year, resumed in part their enrichment activities in the form of research. This was, of course, a move going beyond the parameters of the moratorium, as we understand it. During the subsequent talks, we tried to agree with the Iranians on returning the status quo. That did not occur. In accordance with

existing agreements the Iran question was twice discussed in February and March in the IAEA Board of Governors and in accordance with the agreements the UN Security Council was informed of the results of this discussion. We favor the Security Council helping the IAEA restore the normal process with Iran on the fulfillment of the decisions which were adopted in the IAEA Board of Governors. Without the IAEA, any further work on Iran will no longer be productive and will not be able to be oriented towards the solution of the principal task, and we regard as such in the Iranian nuclear matter the inadmissibility of a violation of the regime for the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. Therefore the UN Security Council, which is a political organ, must act with extreme caution and not permit efforts aimed at the strengthening and nonviolation of the nonproliferation regime to be used for political purposes. The Security Council should responsibly approach its mandate. Our belief is that, at this stage, it should limit itself to support of the efforts of the IAEA and calls for Iran to respond in full measure to these efforts of the Agency, should cooperate with the Agency in the clarification of the issues still outstanding. Most importantly, we consider it necessary to work out a clearly defined line of action, because if a question, not necessarily the Iran question, is flung into the UN Security Council without a strategy for action to buttress it, this does not always lead to the desired result, especially as the Security Council is a machine which, once started, is very difficult to stop. Without having prior consensus on where this machine can lead us all to, we would not like to be drawn into any substantive discussion of the Iranian file in the UN Security Council. To express support for the IAEA - yes, probably, this has to be done. But it is only the IAEA that can professionally accomplish the process on the Iranian nuclear file.

As to the third question, there are many situations where multilateral formats of communication with this or that side exist. There is the Contact Group on the former Yugoslavia and there is the Quartet of international mediators and there is the format on Iran that has spontaneously emerged: the European trio, Russia, China and the United States. But the presence of all these formats does not mean that none of the participants should have any bilateral contacts with the side concerned. That was the vein in which we acted when we spoke with Hamas. We spoke on the basis of the agreed positions of the Quartet. It has been in such a format that we have been working with the parties in the former Yugoslavia when we have been promoting the agreed positions of the Contact Group. It was in this vein that Russia worked with Iran when we sought Iran's consent to the joint proposal of the Six. If the Europeans, the Chinese or the Americans pursue the same line, I see nothing terrible in this. Sometimes additional direct contacts can help move the matter off dead center. If that happens, I will only welcome it.

Question: Allow me to return to the Middle East theme. Still, Hamas is not going to recognize Israel and generally does not recognize the Roadmap, as they consider it "dead." So that the situation is in an impasse. Does Russia have any new ideas how to get out of it?

Your assessment of the situation in Lebanon, especially as an internal dialogue is under way there, particularly on sharp issues, such as arms supplies to Hezbollah, the Shebaa Farms, and Taliban-Semitic relations against the background of UN Security Council resolution 1559?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I cannot agree that the Roadmap is dead. Too little time has passed since the real work with Hamas began. It is not only us that are conducting it. Many Arab capitals, and the Arab League are conducting this work. I repeat it, some time is

required for Hamas to fully become conscious of its responsibility in its new capacity. I think that the people of Palestine are awaiting just this. Let us not forget that the Roadmap, when it was just worked out by the Quartet, received the most diverse characterizations, including the description that it was dead from the moment of its approval. Such remarks were then being heard not from the Palestinians and not from the Arabs. After many months the UN Security Council nevertheless approved this document. Now it is a part of international law. It has acquired an entirely different status. I am convinced that the Hamas leadership will carefully acquaint themselves with this document, by holding necessary consultations with Abu Mazen and with other Palestinians who were involved in the process of the consultations while elaborating the Roadmap, who know its history and know the UN's position on the Roadmap. I am convinced that the situation is far from hopeless. The Roadmap is the way to a just settlement of the Palestine problem, the most acute, the most chronic, the most explosive problem of the contemporary world. We consider that the rumors of its death are strongly exaggerated.

As to Lebanon, we are very concerned that Lebanese society has not yet managed to forge an internal consensus. We welcome the initiatives for commencing an intra-Lebanese dialogue, which I understand is still in its initial stage, but which is the only way to settle intra-Lebanese problems.

Yesterday at the talks with Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid Muallem we discussed this question. I sensed the sincere keenness of Muallem to assist this intra-Lebanese dialogue evolving normally, I sensed the readiness of the Syrian side to fully normalize its relations with Lebanon, including the exchange of embassies and a demarcation of borders. Of course, and I cannot but agree with this, Syria presumes that the demarcation of the border should be started from its northern part, because to start from the Shebaa Farms area is probably unrealistic, considering the too many complexities which the problem of these Farms involves. We discussed this theme both in New York with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and the day before yesterday in Moscow with his Special Representative Terje Roed-Larsen, who is a well-versed person in Middle Eastern affairs, and with Javier Solana. We are convinced that this problem should be tackled and that it should be tackled ultimately on the basis of a direct agreement between Syria and Lebanon. Hopefully, that's the way it'll be. But so far, in my personal opinion, the time for that has not yet come, although to put it off indefinitely would be undesirable.

Regarding arms supplies to Hezbollah we shall be ready with the utmost seriousness to consider any specific facts of such supplies. Statements periodically appear that such supplies are being made. In a number of cases they are not corroborated by facts and the words simply remain words. We cannot act on such a basis and cannot use our capabilities in order together with the other Quartet members to settle the problem if we do not have any specific facts. In a number of instances, as was the case recently, it concerns arms supplies with the consent of the Lebanese army. In such situations we also can hardly help in any way. But we will try to help cut short any illegal supplies if they are documented and if we have concrete information.

Question: Does Hezbollah have the right to have arms?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Hezbollah, whoever says whatsoever and no matter what external factors may be involved with the phenomenon of Hezbollah, this is still a Lebanese

phenomenon. Hezbollah is rooted in the circle of Lebanese Shiites. The Lebanese themselves should tackle its problems. The less external interference there is, the simpler it will be to do that, but this is an inter-Lebanese problem. To a significant extent the settlement of the status of Hezbollah in Lebanese society will help the settlement of the problem of the Shebaa Farms.

Question: How much does your policy towards the Middle East, towards Hamas and Iran influence your relations with the United States?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Our actions towards Hamas, the Palestine problem, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and our relations with Israel, with the PNA, with Syria, with Lebanon, with Egypt, with all countries of the region, with Jordan, with the Arab League and indeed with all who are some way or another involved in efforts to settle the conflicts in the Middle East are absolutely transparent in the sense that we are not conducting any closed games. We are acting, first and foremost, on the basis of existing collective understandings in the form of the resolutions of the UN Security Council, in the form of the decisions of the Quartet of international mediators. We have absolutely nothing to hide from anybody. If we are convinced that for implementing the available collective understandings, for attempting to save the Palestinian-Israeli peace process it is extremely important to convey the Quartet's point of view to Hamas, we are doing that openly and telling the world about it. We do not maintain any secret, covert contacts either with Hamas or with the Muslim Brethren. I hope you understand what I am talking about.

As to how much our Quartet partners like or dislike these actions, I do not think that our motives are not understandable to them. We are talking about these motives, we are talking about the results of our contacts. At the end of the visit to Moscow of the Hamas delegation, we briefed all our colleagues in the Quartet. Yesterday and today I also told them all about how the talks with Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid Muallem had passed here. We only welcome when some one of the Quartet members assumes the initiative to promote the common positions. More often than others, incidentally, the US so does, thanks to whose efforts and those of Condoleezza Rice personally more than once very acute situation was resolved last year and the year before last, including, by the way, the situation in Jericho. It was resolved and a scheme had been agreed which, unfortunately, yesterday crumbled. But at the same time on a number of other incidents the United States and personally US Secretary of State Rice, and before her Colin Powell, assumed the main burden of efforts to prevent a scuttling of the decisions of the Quartet. Just as in a number of other critical stages in Middle East settlement the EU assumed the principal role. We also welcomed this. Therefore I hope that our partners will perceive our understandable, honest, open efforts likewise.

Question: To what extent do relations with the United States influence the situation in the region?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: To us, each vector of our foreign policy is self-valuable. We do not regard our multivectoriness as a zero-sum game: we have discussed something with somebody, agreed on something and this will be directed against somebody else. The contemporary world is such, and the Middle East all the more so, that without collective efforts nothing can be accomplished. Collective efforts presuppose a joint elaboration of a position which cannot admit extremes in either direction, which cannot unambiguously state:

"in this crisis this is the culprit and that is the victim." That simply is never the case, and even less so can such a position be taken in politics. There is a need for compromises which, far from undermining the foundations of international law, would take into consideration the lawful interests of each of the parties. There is the diplomatic, or political, proverb that "a stable settlement is a settlement which neither party is completely satisfied with." That is a sense of dissatisfaction is bound to be there, but there can be no stable settlement which one party declares its 100 percent victory, and the other its 100 percent defeat. That's how it might happen in Kosovo, unfortunately. This is a separate theme. Let us not delve into it. Hence all that which we are working out within the Quartet together with the US, EU and UN is a compromise, but a compromise which, in my conviction, is called upon to move settlement forward. I am convinced that this collective creativity can only benefit if we, the Quartet members, take counsel more with the countries of the region, in particular, with Egypt and Jordan. They are two countries which are very active in the search of solutions to various conflicts, to the exacerbations of the Palestinian-Israeli situation and which are keen to cooperate with the Quartet.

I and Russia as a whole advocate that, apart from continuing the activities of the Quartet, forms should be found which would enable in particular Egypt, Jordan and perhaps the LAS Secretary General not merely cooperate with the Quartet, but also participate in the elaboration of positions which the Quartet discusses.

Question: What is the difference between the export of democracy and of Soviet ideology?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Indeed the USSR had an ideology and politics. A part of this politics was the export of the ideology. We well know how much this costs, how much effort it takes and where it ends if somebody tries to make somebody happy against his will. Changes have to ripen. I am convinced that all of us and the entire world are moving in one and the same direction. It is democracy, which in each country will have its own face, because ours are different histories, cultures and civilizations; it is the path of market and market relations, but of a civilized market, not of the market through which contemporary Russia went through in the first years of disintegration and which we are now trying, at enormous pains, to tidy up, but of a market where just rules and fair competition will prevail and where economic levers won't be used for achieving political aims. We are all moving in this direction. But trying to cause everybody to move at one speed or especially follow one model, be it democracy or market, is unrealistic and impossible. Therefore the efforts being made to artificially speed this process are wasted efforts. I hope that a good example is the work that was done in the G8 with regard to the Greater Middle East, when at the end of the day the idea of promoting democratic change was discussed with the countries of the region. When these countries were asked, "you need help?" they said: "No, we won't reject it. But we ourselves will determine the forms, extent and areas of help for ourselves." The result was, in my opinion, a not bad concept of the Broader Middle East and North Africa, which is now a joint project of the G8 and the countries of the region. I am very pleased that this year Russia as President of the Group of Eight will together with Jordan be cochairing the 3rd session of the Forum for the Future.

Question: Did Russia know of the decision of the Americans and British to leave Jericho? Are there any international legal grounds for making Palestinian prisoners leave the PNA territory or, as a last resort, placing them under international supervision?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: To your first question my answer is negative. We did not know about the intention of the American and British monitors to leave Jericho.

Regarding the international legal grounds, I am not an expert on the agreement of 2002. Probably those who worked out this agreement and who arranged for the mechanism for its implementation should help you satisfy your curiosity. But I will stress that all those who are involved in the present situation must, of course, show maximum restraint and responsibility.

Question: Great fears now exist with regard to Iraq. Why is it being felt that Russia really does not play any role in Iraq?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: You want us to be engaged in restoring order in Iraq? I have the feeling that you bear in mind the military situation only. We indeed play no role in the military situation, and thank God. We play a role in efforts which are called upon to help ensure a normal life for the Iraqi people. More than a hundred of our specialists continue working in Iraq. Many went away from there during the hostilities, but many stayed, ensuring by their work under bullets and shells at least some power supply for areas of that country. Now our companies continue working there in conditions of considerable risk, restoring the projects which were destroyed in the period of bombings and shellings. I hope that we shall be able to observe an improvement in the present security situation, which so far, unfortunately, is degrading. Already an ever larger number not only of journalists, but also of officials from the states which have their troops in Iraq call the situation a civil war. The Iraqis themselves are increasingly using this term. We are committed to our pledges to help the friendly Iraqi people restore their economy. A tragedy is taking place there. I hope that although the role which our companies and our economic specialists play there is inconspicuous, your readers and listeners will learn about it.

Regarding Iraq's neighbors. There is a school of thought that the neighbors are to blame for everything. Militants are penetrating via the neighbors, and the neighbors are trying to keep this or that group in Iraq from reaching agreements with another group. We're talking about an entirely different thing. Immediately after the end of combat operations was announced slightly less than two years ago and when the talk of arranging a political process began, we suggested that the very first step be something like a conference, whose core would consist of Iraq's major political, ethnic and religious forces, together with whom all of Iraq's neighbors, the Arab League, the OIC and the members of the UN Security Council would gather, and that the neighbors together with the other participants induce the Iraqis to agree on the basic parameters for a settlement process. I am convinced that if this had been done, then the political process would have been much more stable. This is still not too late. Better late than never. Now the principal slogan in Iraq is national consensus, something which we spoke of from the outset. It would have been better if national consensus had become the basis for settlement, but once this did not happen, then let us at least now try and form this national consensus in some way. Again I am convinced that this is best to be done not through secret talks, but by inviting all the main Iraqi forces and the neighbors of Iraq, because each of the neighbors has its influence on some or other confessions and groups in Iraq. Everybody knows about that. Then why keep the neighbors from a positive influence, while at the same time accusing them of a negative influence? I think that the idea of a new meeting along the lines of the meeting in Sharm El Sheikh, along the lines of the meeting which took place recently in Cairo with the invitation of all the Iraqi groups, all the neighbors and the United Nations Security Council members, remains relevant and, perhaps,

its relevance is actually increasing.

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A video recording of the interview is posted on the Russian MFA's Web site in the Video section (<http://www.mid.ru>).

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