

Congressman Rothman Questions Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff about the Middle East

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Washington, DC -- Congressman Steve Rothman (NJ-9), a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittees on Defense; and State and Foreign Operations, questioned Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, and Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a hearing of the Appropriations Defense Subcommittee on March 2, 2011. The Congressman's questions centered on America's strategy regarding Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability, the U.S.-Israel alliance, and aid to Lebanon.

Pictured above is Congressman Rothman questioning Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, and Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a hearing of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee on March 2, 2010.

Exchange between Congressman Rothman, Secretary Gates, and Admiral Mullen:

Rep.
Rothman:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I just want to thank you, Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen. I think history will record that you're two extraordinary

Americans, probably the finest -- or among the finest who've ever held your respective positions.

I want to thank you for your personal courage and your professional courage in so many areas, as well as your thoughtfulness in so many areas, and your caring about our forces and their families. Which does not mean that you're overly touchy-feely, because I also believe you have created the most robust and lethal military on the face of the earth and in American history.

Let me go quickly to two questions if I can get them in. Last week, the Director of National Intelligence, Mr. Clapper, testified that Iran has the scientific and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons.

Is it the policy of the United States still to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons-capable nation? And if so or if not, please advise me.

And if it's still our policy to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability - I asked this two years ago and I got a yes answer from each of you gentleman - is the U.S. military, if given the order by the President, the Commander in Chief, capable of executing the actions necessary to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear-capable - nuclear weapons-capable?

Sec.
Gates:

Iran acquiring nuclear weapons is unacceptable to the United States. And if the President should order we have the capability to take action.

Rep.
Rothman:

Admiral Mullen, do you feel the same way?

Amb.
Mullen:

I do.

Rep.
Rothman:

Do you know if our policy is still to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear weapons-capable, gentlemen?

Sec.
Gates:

The way I have heard it framed and - and maybe the admiral has a better memory than I do. But the way I've always heard it framed was, both in the Bush and the Obama administrations, is that Iran acquiring a nuclear capability is unacceptable to the United States.

Amb.
Mullen:

And I - and I would agree with that.

Rep.
Rothman:

Thank you, gentlemen.

Admiral Mullen, I believe you said - I believe the secretary shares these views, and if that's not true tell me, but I believe you do - I think the Admiral said keeping our military partnerships strong was essential.

And that was along the lines of my Chairwoman on the State and Foreign Operations Subcommittee, Ms. Granger's, comments about people challenging the one percent of our budget that goes to State Department and diplomacy, for which you each, gentlemen, have commented that has been of great importance to you in your work and in saving lives, especially our war-fighters, as well as completing - successfully completing our missions. And, Admiral, you mentioned Egypt, Pakistan and Afghanistan as members of those military partnerships.

Can you comment about our military partnership with Israel - I know you were just there, Admiral - and the value to the U.S.'s national security about our military and intelligence partnerships with the state of Israel?

Amb.
Mullen:

Well, I - it's of extraordinary value. I've invested a lot of my time with the IDF, as well. And I think that partnership, which is long-standing, is critical and will continue to be in the future.

And - and I'm not - I can't say - I mean, I'm not directly involved in the intelligence aspect of that. But, certainly, we enjoy a deep relationship that I think is absolutely critical to the near term and long term stability in the Middle East. ...

Rep.
Rothman:

With regard to the U.S.
national security - is it critical, as well, to U.S. national security....

Amb.
Mullen:

Yes, it is.

Rep.
Rothman:

... our military
partnership with Israel?

Amb.
Mullen:

Yes it is. Absolutely.

Rep.
Rothman:

Mr.
Secretary, do you feel that way, as well?

Sec.
Gates:

Yes. And - and I would
just add, I think - I think in terms of concrete steps to improve the security
relationship between the two countries, more has been done in the last two
years than in any comparable period in my entire career.

Rep.
Rothman:

That is my understanding,
Mr. Secretary.

Further, with regard - is
my time up, Chairman?

Chairman
Young:

Probably time for one
more question.

Rep.
Rothman:

Well, I just wanted to follow up also on the aid to the Lebanese armed forces. I understand it's a very - military aid to the Lebanese armed forces - a very delicate situation. We don't want those weapons to fall into the hands of Hezbollah, but Hezbollah has practical control over the country, although maybe not complete political control.

How do you strike the right balance of which weapons and which aid to provide to the Lebanese armed forces, and when? And when would the tipping point come, when you would say those - that aid would no longer be appropriate, given U.S. national security interests?

Sec.
Gates:

Well, I would - I would say that I am very concerned about a Lebanese government where, even if Hezbollah does not - is not represented as the prime minister or holds significant cabinet positions, nonetheless exercises a relatively effective control over that government.

And since that development took place, I would just say that, without getting into too much detail, that I have become much more cautious in terms of the kind of cooperation that I approve.

Amb.
Mullen:

I would only add to that that it is something that the secretary and I and others, that we discuss all the time. You talk about the balance, because it is a balance, and it's something, obviously, that I certainly have discussed with my counterpart and our counterparts in the IDF as well.

So share the concern, and - and understand completely. But it is something we work our way through all the time.

Rep.
Rothman:

Thank you, gentlemen.

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