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Addresses Concerns Directly With Deputy Secretary Of State Armitage

At Hearing Before Congressman's Committee

Washington, DC - Following President Bush's announcement that he is ready to move forward with his "roadmap" peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Congressman Steve Rothman (D-NJ9) cautioned a top Administration official late last week not to place undue pressure on Israel to make concessions. Rothman said he supports the plan overall, but emphasized that it is the Palestinians who must prove to the international community, and most importantly the Israeli people, that they are ready to make peace. During a one-on-one exchange at a hearing of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, on which the Congressman serves, Rothman received assurances from Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage that the Bush Administration shared the Congressman's view that the onus for peace is on the Palestinians.

"Whether it is the fact that the Palestinians restarted the intifadah after walking away from an Israeli peace proposal that would have given them 97 percent of what they asked for without offering a counterproposal, or that many in the Palestinian Authority are literally cheering the deaths of American soldiers in the war with Iraq while displaying Saddam Hussein's picture prominently in their offices - even above Arafat's, it is extraordinarily clear that the Palestinians are anything but friends of the United States," Rothman said. "At the same time, it is Israel, our strategic military partner and 55 year friend, who has exhibited extraordinary restraint in not getting involved in the war against Iraq, at the request of the United States government, even though it would welcome the opportunity to join us in toppling our mutual threat, Saddam Hussein. After all, it was Israel who took out an Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, thus preventing the world from being forced to face a nuclear-armed Saddam."

Bush unveiled his "roadmap" for peace in the Middle East in a White House Rose Garden address in June 2002. The plan centered on the U.S. supporting the creation of a provisional Palestinian state in exchange for new leadership within the Palestinian Authority that is committed to peace, ending suicide bombings, and an overall secure Israel. Just before the war with Iraq got underway, Bush announced that he remained committed to this "roadmap."

"The Palestinians first have to be willing to live in peace with Israel, their neighbor, and our dearest and most important strategic ally in the region," Rothman told Armitage. "The burden is upon the Palestinians to have a leadership that will stop the terror. There is only one constituency for the Palestinians. They must persuade the Israeli people they do not want to kill them and obliterate Israel from the map -- either today or in the future.

Then Israel will make a genuine peace with them, as they did with Jordan and Egypt and a cold peace with Syria and with Lebanon.â€Â•

houseRothman also expressed his support for a new foreign aid package to Israel that is making its way through the House Appropriations Committee. Israel has expressed its gratitude for the aid package, which would provide Israel with \$1 billion in military assistance and \$9 billion loan guarantees for economic assistance.

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