

Hagel Record on Israel: 'Cause for Concern'

The House Armed Services Committee will be the stage for a tough battle on Thursday, when it is scheduled to hold a confirmation hearing for Chuck Hagel, U.S. President Barack Obama's nominee for the post of defense secretary. The controversial nomination has elicited widespread resistance due to the views Hagel has voiced in past interviews, declarations and Senate votes on a long list of topics.

Although most observers expect Hagel will eventually be confirmed—barring unexpected fireworks at the hearing—Thursday's testimony will be contentious.

At least three Republican panel members, including James Inhofe, the party's leader on the committee, have said they do not support Hagel's nomination. In the entire Senate, which would vote on Hagel if he is cleared by the committee, only one of the 45 Republicans—Mississippi's Thad Cochran—has come out in Hagel's favor.

Objections to Hagel's nomination are not exclusive to Republicans: Even (conservative) Sarah Elizabeth Cupp, a commentator on the liberal MSNBC network remarked that she opposes the nomination. "I gotta be honest: I don't care if he's anti-Semitic. I don't care if he's homophobic. As vile as those qualities are to me, I want to know about his policies," Cupp said. "My objection to Chuck Hagel is not personal—it's about his positions on Iran and his seeming opposition to coercion by force, if necessary, to ensure the Islamic Republic does not develop a nuclear weapon."

In an interview last month, U.S. Representative Eliot Engel, the highest ranking Democrat in the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said that "it seems there is some kind of endemic

hostility toward Israel, and that's troublesome for me and for a lot of other people."

Meanwhile, Republican Jewish Coalition Executive Director Matt Brooks said that "Chuck Hagel's record on Israel, on Iran, and on other vital defense issues is cause for real concern."

Hagel's opponents have voiced grave concern over the potential defense secretary's past remarks, like "I'm a United States Senator, not an Israeli Senator," or comments claiming that Israel was the key obstacle in the way of Middle East peace. Hagel has also previously declined to sign a letter calling on the European Union to classify Hezbollah and Hamas as terror organizations. At one point, remarking on Palestinian terror, Hagel said that "Desperate men do desperate things."

Ever since Obama announced Hagel's nomination, the latter has met with both Democrats and Republicans in the Senate in efforts to ease their objections and to apologize for his past attack against what he termed "the Jewish lobby," among other things. Meanwhile, his opponents stepped up efforts to block the nomination, joined by, among others, more than 400 Christians United for Israel members, who have been exercising their influence on various senators.

Hagel will likely be asked some very tough questions during Thursday's hearing. In addition to questions regarding his stated views on Israel and Iran, he is expected to be asked about his support for Obama's wish to make deep cuts in the American defense budget. But the main emphasis will be on issues like his past objections to unilateral U.S. military action and to Iran sanctions. In 2008, Hagel also supported dialogue with Syria, and in light of the devastating, nearly two-year long civil war there, he will likely be asked about that as well.

Renowned Jewish attorney Alan Dershowitz wrote an article last month voicing his own personal objection to the Hagel

nomination. "Were Chuck Hagel to be nominated as secretary of defense, the Iranian mullahs would interpret President Obama's decision as a signal that the military option was now, effectively, off the table. It would encourage them to proceed with their development of nuclear weapons without fear of an attack from the United States," Dershowitz wrote.

On Wednesday the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) pointed to further statements made by Hagel, and urged senators to vote against confirming him in that office. Citing a speech Hagel gave to the J-Street organization in 2009, ZOA referenced Hagel saying that he opposed isolating Iran through diplomacy and sanctions, "How in the world do we think isolating someone is going to bring them around to your way of thinking?" Hagel said.

Additionally, a report in the conservative Washington Free Beacon has unearthed a Hagel statement that appeared in a Nebraska newspaper, the Lincoln Journal Star, on Jan. 12, 2003, in which Hagel said that Israel was "keep[ing] Palestinians caged up like animals."

ZOA National President Morton A. Klein said, "These newly unearthed statements by Hagel simply reinforce the fact that Hagel has a virtually unrivaled record of hostility to Israel; bigotry toward Jews and gays; disbelief in the importance of a strong U.S. military; indulgence of Middle Eastern terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas; and antipathy towards any conceivable measure—economic or military—for preventing Iran becoming a nuclear power if negotiations fail.

"These statements afford further reasons for the Senate to vote against confirming Chuck Hagel as defense secretary and we urge senators to do so."

Hagel detailed his views in 112 pages of written responses to wide-ranging questions submitted by lawmakers.

In them, he said that if confirmed as the next defense

secretary, he would ensure that the military is prepared to strike Iran if necessary but stressed the need to be “cautious and certain” when contemplating the use of force.