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Marco Rubio, Rand Paul differ on Middle East

One wants to use muscle; other wants more restraint

By: Seth McLaughlin – March 3, 2013

Sens. Marco Rubio and Rand Paul — in what could be a preview of a 2016 Republican presidential primary showdown — are staking out markedly different positions on U.S. intervention in the world, and particularly on American policy toward the Middle East

Kentucky's Mr. Paul, who visited Israel and Jordan in January, is calling for Republicans to adopt a more restrained and less interventionist approach to global affairs, and is embracing the sequester cuts to the defense budget that is sending military hawks into a tizzy.

Mr. Rubio, who visited Israel and Jordan last month, is advocating a more muscular brand of global leadership and observers said it is significant that the Florida lawmaker tapped Jamie Fly, an adviser to President George W. Bush, as a counselor on foreign affairs and national security.

"What you are getting from Rand is really what he thinks," said James Jay Carafano, vice president of defense policies studies at the Heritage Foundation. "What you are getting from Rubio is in part Jamie, who is more senior, more experienced, and who is more on the side of the offensive realists."

The battle shaping up between the two Republican senators would be Round 2 of the fight that played out last year between Mr. Paul's father, former Rep. Ron Paul, and the rest of the Republican presidential field. The Texas Republican's non-interventionist message hit home with some voters — but not enough to give the elder Mr. Paul a realistic shot at the nomination.

The son's world view is similar, but he calls himself a "realist" rather than an isolationist.

Mr. Paul, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has said he wants to curtail foreign aid, including to Israel, and he's called on the federal government to stop selling F-16 fighter jets, and M1 tanks to Egypt, warning that it fuels an arms race that hurts Israel's security.

He doesn't want to see the United States dragged into the fighting in Syria and he doesn't like the unilateral use of presidential power. Mr. Paul drove home that point last year, holding up a Senate bill to impose further sanctions against Iran and demanding that congressional leaders add language to the measure to ensure it would not pave the way for the president to unilaterally authorize war against Iran.

"Iran does need to know that all options are on the table. But we should not preemptively announce that diplomacy or containment will never be an option," Mr. Paul said in a speech at the Heritage Foundation last month.

Mr. Rubio, meanwhile, billed his trip to the Middle East as a fact-finding mission, saying it will help inform his decisions as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

Like Mr. Paul, Mr. Rubio said the United States should not try to dictate the outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, or tell either side what to do about Jewish settlements in the West Bank. But Mr. Rubio does not want to cut aid to Israel, and he says global problems cannot be solved without the United States.

"The U.S.'s standing in the world is largely built on our commitment to ... human rights and democracy, freedom of religion and freedom of the press," Mr. Rubio said last week at the Washington Institute on Near East Policy. "And we should always be on the side of that. That doesn't always mean that we're going to invade. That doesn't always mean that we're going to give weapons or intervene."

He said the U.S. should be more engaged with Syria's rebels, and he's taken a more forceful tone than Mr. Paul on Iran.

"This is trying to deal with reality," Mr. Rubio said.

James M. Lindsay, senior vice president of the Council on Foreign Relations, said Mr. Paul appears to be cut from the same noninterventionist cloth as his father, while it is too early to tell where Mr. Rubio stands.

But Chris Preble, of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, said Mr. Rubio inherited the neoconservative approach from Sens. John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, military hawks who supported the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as U.S. involvement in Libya and have more recently urged lawmakers to arm Syria's rebels — a position Mr. Rubio has not taken.

"It is an interventionist point of view, which generally is inclined to have the U.S. military involved and U.S. government involved in foreign conflicts, with the idea that our being involved will allow us to shape it in our interests," Mr. Preble said.

Mr. Carafano said both have been learning on the fly.

"My guess is they are going to migrate more toward the center," Mr. Carafano said. "I think they are both on a journey, and they are both growing and maturing."