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Chuck Hagel Nomination Possibility Faces Backlash On Capitol Hill

By: Matt Spetalnick – December 18th, 2012

WASHINGTON - Pro-Israel groups, neoconservatives and even some former colleagues on Capitol Hill are confronting President Barack Obama with a growing backlash against Chuck Hagel, the ex-Republican senator tipped as his leading candidate for defense secretary.

Obama's aides have given no sign of dropping Hagel from consideration - even after several American Jewish leaders privately complained about his policy views, most notably on Israel and Iran, at a White House-hosted Hanukkah party last week, according to one attendee.

But what has become clear in recent days is that the Democratic president will have a Senate confirmation fight on his hands if he decides to nominate the former Nebraska lawmaker, regarded as a moderate Republican, to replace Leon Panetta at the Pentagon.

The White House is preparing for a major realignment of Obama's national security team, possibly by the end of this week, sources familiar with the process have said. But the announcement could be delayed by the difficult "fiscal cliff" negotiations with congressional Republicans.

That could provide more time for Hagel's critics to marshal opposition to his nomination, in public and behind the scenes. But even they are skeptical of being able to derail it.

Obama himself has faced questions from American Jewish leaders about his approach to close U.S. ally Israel, especially given his strained relations with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and may decide to take a risk with Hagel.

"This is a nomination that could be toxic to some degree for the White House," a Senate Republican foreign policy aide said. "Do they really want this in the first months of a second term?"

Some of Israel's leading U.S. supporters contend that Hagel, who left the Senate in 2008, at times opposed Israel's interests, voting several times against U.S. sanctions on Iran, and made disparaging remarks about the influence of what he called a "Jewish lobby" in Washington.

William Kristol of the conservative Weekly Standard wrote in a recent column that Hagel

"has anti-Israel, pro-appeasement-of-Iran bona fides."

While declining to discuss Hagel's record on Israel, White House spokesman Jay Carney told reporters last Thursday that "the president thinks very highly of Senator Hagel."

Hagel's office has remain tight-lipped and had no immediate comment.

J Street, a liberal American Jewish group, said it was "appalled by efforts surfacing in recent days to question his commitment to the state of Israel and to Middle East peace."

But The Washington Post weighed in late on Tuesday with an editorial declaring that Hagel was "not the right choice."

It chided him for advocating deep defense cuts and said he was out-of-step on Iran for voicing skepticism that force might eventually be needed to stop its nuclear program.

REPUBLICAN MISGIVINGS

On Tuesday even some of Hagel's former Republican colleagues expressed misgivings about him.

Asked about Hagel's 2006 statement that the "Jewish lobby intimidates a lot of people here," Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina said he would "have to answer for that comment" if he is nominated.

"And he'll have to answer about why he thought it was a good idea to directly negotiate with Hamas and why he objected to the European Union declaring Hezbollah a terrorist organization," said Graham, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "He's been a friend, he has a stellar military record, but these comments disturb a lot of people."

After leaving office, Hagel urged Obama to open talks with Hamas, which is sworn to Israel's destruction

Senator John McCain of Arizona insisted "we would review his entire record" but declined to "make a judgment until he's nominated."

Ironically, a Hagel nomination might be better received by Democrats - though they too might be wary of his contrarian reputation.

Many Republicans consider Hagel suspect. He was an early dissenter on the Iraq war - an issue that helped Obama rise to prominence - and crossed the aisle to endorse the president in his successful re-election bid this year.

On top of that, since leaving the Senate after two terms, he has been a vocal critic of his own party's fiscal policies.

Obama is said to feel comfortable with Hagel. The two traveled together to the Middle East during the 2008 campaign.

He currently co-chairs Obama's Intelligence Advisory Board, and his confirmation would put the Pentagon under a decorated Vietnam War veteran and give Obama's Cabinet a bipartisan cast.

Christopher Preble, vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute, wrote that Hagel would be an excellent choice and would help keep the U.S. military from undertaking further "quixotic nation-building missions."

But high-profile opposition to Hagel's possible nomination is growing. Abe Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League, told The Washington Post that his record "relating to Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship is, at best, disturbing, and at worst, very troubling."

Josh Block, president of The Israel Project, a pro-Israel group that describes itself as a nonpartisan educational organization, said Hagel's positions were "well outside the mainstream Democratic and Republican consensus."

Some of the negative buzz surrounding Hagel has made its way into Israeli media. "Hagel is a Republican with a problematic voting record on Israel," The Jerusalem Post said on Monday.

Also in the mix for the Pentagon job are Michele Flournoy, a former undersecretary of defense for policy, and Ashton Carter, the current deputy defense secretary.