



Giffords: Some Mideast leaders view Obama with cautious optimism

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The election of President Obama is being viewed with cautious optimism by some Middle East leaders visited by a congressional delegation this past week.

Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., was among delegation members on a four-day visit to five countries that started Saturday and concluded Tuesday night.

Giffords, a member of the House Armed Force Committee, was part of a seven-member congressional delegation that visited Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, plus a stopover in Belgium for NATO talks.

"We were the first group from Congress to travel to the Middle East since the inauguration of President Obama," Giffords said in an interview Wednesday.

The delegation's first stop was Saturday in Tel Aviv for meetings with Israeli political and military leaders.

That included current Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Benjamin Netanyahu, the former prime minister who is favored to win Tuesday's election.

"The cease-fire was in effect for a week before we arrived," Giffords said of the pause in Israel's incursion into Palestinian Gaza.

Besides that ongoing conflict, discussions with Israeli leaders also included Iran and nuclear weapons in the region.

Talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad showed that leader "receptive to dialogue" with the U.S., particularly after the change in administration in Washington, D.C., Giffords said.

Syria is a critical player in the region, Giffords said, noting that the country is not closely aligned with fundamentalist Islamic factions that control the political agendas in neighboring Arab countries.

The delegation met with both Iraqi and U.S. military leaders to get updates on the prospects for the future of that country.

"The elections went nearly flawlessly," Giffords said regarding last week's parliamentary elections. Final results are pending but Giffords said it appears that candidates aligned with U.S.-supported Prime Minister Nouri al-Malaki "appeared to be leading."

Giffords said the delegation went to areas of Baghdad that several months ago would have been too dangerous.

"The amount of violence has decreased so much," she said.