

Rivals focus on foreign policy issues; GOP contenders also spar over immigration, defense

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Body

Republican presidential candidates clashed Tuesday on when to pull U.S. troops from Afghanistan, how to approach a hostile regime in Iran and whether to accede to cuts in the Pentagon budget as they sought to define themselves on national security issues.

Just six weeks before the opening Iowa caucuses, the contenders drew clearer contrasts and challenged one another more sharply than before in a debate focused on foreign policy and national security issues.

Much of the attention was on a new front-runner, former House speaker Newt Gingrich, who toward the end of the two-hour forum waded into one of the most contentious issues in Republican politics: Immigration.

"I'm prepared to take the heat for saying, 'Let's be humane about enforcing the law,'" Gingrich said, saying some illegal immigrants who had been in the United States for a long time should be able to gain legal status. Such a policy would protect families, he said.

Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney and Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann immediately criticized the proposal as a "magnet" that would draw more illegal immigrants to this country.

There were other disputes.

Bachmann called Texas Gov. Rick Perry "highly naive" in calling for a cut-off of U.S. aid to Pakistan and other countries that don't support the United States. Romney and former Utah governor Jon Huntsman sparred on maintaining U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

And former Godfather's Pizza CEO Herman Cain said he would consider having the United States join Israel in bombing suspected Iranian nuclear facilities, an idea that Texas Rep. Ron Paul warned would be dangerous and unwise.

The evening featured a reconfigured Republican field.

In the USA TODAY/Gallup Poll released Monday, Gingrich edged Romney for the lead by a single, statistically insignificant percentage point, 22%-21% -- making him the sixth candidate or potential candidate to top the field this year in a roller coaster race.

He is the latest contender to benefit from a search by some Republican voters, including more conservative ones, for an alternative to Romney.

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Gingrich, whose rise has been fueled by his performances in a string of debates, spoke with a characteristically professorial tone and laced his responses with references to U.S. history. Still, on immigration and defense, he took positions at odds with conservative orthodoxy, saying savings could be found in the Pentagon budget without endangering national security.

Both issues could prove to be a test of his appeal with GOP primary voters.

Romney, in contrast, called for increased defense spending.

The sometimes contentious forum was televised on CNN and co-sponsored by the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute.

Many of the questions were posed by conservatives and neoconservatives from the two think tanks, including several veterans of past Republican administrations.

The eight candidates arrayed across the stage at Constitution Hall, just a few blocks from the White House, faced distinct and pressing challenges:

Cain was trying to recover from a video that went viral from a session last week with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel editorial board in which he struggled and stammered in response to a question about Libya.

In the debate, however, he spoke less often than the candidates who have dealt with foreign policy issues in Congress or as a diplomat.

Perry, who has fallen to single digits in national polls after once leading the pack, needed to demonstrate a command of national issues after a string of stumbling debate performances.

He said he would impose a no-fly zone on Syria.

Huntsman, a former U.S. ambassador to China, hoped to finally break through by demonstrating his foreign policy expertise. At the moment, his 1% standing in national polls just barely qualifies him to participate in the nationally televised debates.

Also participating in the debate was former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum.

In the opening exchange, the candidates differed on how to balance fighting terrorism with preserving civil liberties.

Gingrich said he would support not only extending but also strengthening the controversial Patriot Act.

"You want to use every tool that you can possibly use" against a terrorist armed with a nuclear weapon, Gingrich said.

But Paul called the Patriot Act "unpatriotic."

"You can prevent crimes by becoming a police state," he said. "You might prevent a crime. But the crime then will be against the American people."

On Afghanistan, Huntsman said the time had come to pull out all U.S. troops, criticizing Romney's argument that he would listen to the commanders on the ground in deciding when the mission was completed.

A president "ought to be informed by a lot of different voices," he said.

"This is not a time to cut and run," Romney replied.

Tuesday's forum was the 11th debate of the political season. Two more are scheduled in Iowa next month.

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