

September 16: Benjamin Netanyahu, Susan Rice, Keith Ellison, Peter King, Bob Woodward, Jeffrey Goldberg, Andrea Mitchell

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MR. DAVID GREGORY: This morning, a special hour of MEET THE PRESS. Turmoil in the Middle East creates a flashpoint on the campaign trail. Set off by an American anti-Islamic video, rage against the U.S. sweeps the Arab world. And an attack on the U.S. Consulate in Libya kills ambassador Chris Stephens and three others.

(Videotape)

HILLARY CLINTON: The people of Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia did not trade the tyranny of a dictator for the tyranny of a mob.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: But in this highly-charged campaign environment new questions about how the Obama administration should respond enter the political debate.

(Videotape)

MR. MITT ROMNEY: The administration was wrong to stand by statements sympathizing with those who had breached our embassy in Egypt instead of condemning their actions.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: This morning we'll talk to a key member of the president's foreign policy team--the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice.

Also, this morning, an exclusive network interview with a key player in the Middle East--the prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu. Has relations between his country and the U.S. have at a new low over the looming nuclear threat from Iran?

(Videotape)

BENJAMIN NETANYAHU: Those in the international community that refuse to put red lines before Iran don't have a moral right to place a red light before Israel.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: Sorting out U.S. options in the Middle East, consequences for the region, and the political impact in November--our political roundtable. Joining us, the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress, Democratic Representative from Minnesota Keith Ellison; the chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, New York Republican congressman Peter King; Author of the new book, *The Price of Politics*, *The Washington Post's* Bob Woodward; the *Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg; and NBC's chief foreign affairs correspondent Andrea Mitchell.

Announcer: From NBC News in Washington, MEET THE PRESS with David Gregory.

GREGORY: And good morning. Relative calm this morning in the Middle East after several days of intense anti-American protests raged across many parts of the Islamic world. But word this morning that the Obama administration has ordered the evacuation of all but emergency personnel from diplomatic missions in Tunisia and Sudan. And defense secretary Leon Panetta saying this morning, the Pentagon has deployed forces to several areas in an increased effort to protect U.S. personnel and property from the potential of violent protests, the latest consequences, of course,

of this troubling unrest. Joining me now for the very latest, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice. Ambassador Rice, welcome back to MEET THE PRESS.

MS. SUSAN RICE (U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations): Thank you, good to be here.

GREGORY: The images as you well know are jarring to Americans watching all of this play out this week, and we'll share the map of all of this turmoil with our viewers to show the scale of it across not just the Arab world, but the entire Islamic world and flashpoints as well. In Egypt, of course, the protests outside the U.S. embassy there that Egyptian officials were slow to put down. This weekend in Pakistan, protests as well there. More anti-American rage. Also protests against the drone strikes. In Yemen, you also had arrests and some deaths outside of our U.S. embassy there. How much longer can Americans expect to see these troubling images and these protests go forward?

MS. RICE: Well, David, we can't predict with any certainty. But let's remember what has transpired over the last several days. This is a response to a hateful and offensive video that was widely disseminated throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Obviously, our view is that there is absolutely no excuse for violence and that-- what has happened is condemnable, but this is a-- a spontaneous reaction to a video, and it's not dissimilar but, perhaps, on a slightly larger scale than what we have seen in the past with *The Satanic Verses* with the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Now, the United States has made very clear and the president has been very plain that our top priority is the protection of American personnel in our facilities and bringing to justice those who...

GREGORY: All right.

MS. RICE: ...attacked our facility in Benghazi.

GREGORY: Well, let's talk-- talk about-- well, you talked about this as spontaneous. Can you say definitively that the attacks on-- on our consulate in Libya that killed ambassador Stevens and others there security personnel, that was spontaneous, was it a planned attack? Was there a terrorist element to it?

MS. RICE: Well, let us-- let me tell you the-- the best information we have at present. First of all, there's an FBI investigation which is ongoing. And we look to that investigation to give us the definitive word as to what transpired. But putting together the best information that we have available to us today our current assessment is that what happened in Benghazi was in fact initially a spontaneous reaction to what had just transpired hours before in Cairo, almost a copycat of-- of the demonstrations against our facility in Cairo, which were prompted, of course, by the video. What we think then transpired in Benghazi is that opportunistic extremist elements came to the consulate as this was unfolding. They came with heavy weapons which unfortunately are readily available in post revolutionary Libya. And it escalated into a much more violent episode. Obviously, that's-- that's our best judgment now. We'll await the results of the investigation. And the president has been very clear--we'll work with the Libyan authorities to bring those responsible to justice.

GREGORY: Was there a failure here that this administration is responsible for, whether it's an intelligence failure, a failure to see this coming, or a failure to adequately protect U.S. embassies and installations from a spontaneous kind of reaction like this?

MS. RICE: David, I don't think so. First of all we had no actionable intelligence to suggest that-- that any attack on our facility in Benghazi was imminent. In Cairo, we did have indications that there was the risk that the video might spark some-- some protests and our embassy, in fact, acted accordingly, and had called upon the Egyptian authorities to-- to reinforce our facility. What we have seen as-- with respect to the security response, obviously we had security personnel in Benghazi, a-- a significant number, and tragically, among those four that were killed were two of our security personnel. But what happened, obviously, overwhelmed the security we had in place which is why the president ordered additional reinforcements to Tripoli and-- and why elsewhere in the world we have been working with governments to ensure they take up their obligations to protect us and we reinforce where necessary.

GREGORY: The president and the secretary of state have talked about a mob mentality. That's my words, not their words, but they talked about the-- the tyranny of mobs operating in this part of the world. Here's the reality, if you look at foreign aid--U.S. direct foreign aid to the two countries involved here, in Libya and Egypt, this is what you'd see: two hundred million since 2011 to Libya, over a billion a year to Egypt and yet Americans are seeing these kinds of protests and attacks on our own diplomats. Would-- what do you say to members of congress who are now weighing whether to suspend our aid to these countries if this is the response that America gets?

MS. RICE: Well, first of all, David, let's put this in perspective. As I said, this is a response to a-- a very offensive video. It's not the first time that American facilities have come under attack in the Middle East, going back to 1982 in-- in Beirut, going back to the Khobar Towers in-- in Saudi Arabia, or even the attack on our embassy in 2008 in Yemen.

GREGORY: Or Iran in 1979.

MS. RICE: This has-- this has happened in the past, but there-- and so I don't think that-- that we should misunderstand what this is. The reason

we provide aid in Egypt and in Libya is because it serves American interests because the relationships...

GREGORY: But-- but our Americans are not being served if this is the response.

MS. RICE: It serves our interests to have Egypt willing and able to-- to maintain its peace treaty with Israel, it serves our interest for Egypt to continue to be a strong partner. Now, let's be clear, the government, once President Obama called President Morsi, immediately in Egypt the security forces came out and have provided very significant protection. Same in Tunisia, same in Libya, same in Yemen. And all of these leaders have very forcefully conveyed their condemnation of what has transpired.

GREGORY: But there were conflicting messages from the Morsi government. In Arabic they encourage protests, in English they said stop the protests. This from an ally that we give over a billion dollars?

MS. RICE: What has happened in fact is that the Egyptian government has come out and protected our facilities. Our embassy is open today, things are calm. And Morsi has repeatedly been clear in his condemnation of-- of what has occurred. We-- we are in these partnerships, David, over the long-term. We think that-- that-- despite this very bumpy path we're on and the very disturbing images we've seen, it's in the United States fundamental interest that people have the ability to choose their own governments, that the governments be democratic and free. That's in our long-term best interest.

GREGORY: You know that this...

MS. RICE: We need to reinforce that with our assistance.

GREGORY: We are in the middle of a heated presidential campaign, there are different foreign policy visions. That's why we wanted to dedicate the hour to this today to really understand these different views. Mitt Romney spoke out this week, he criticized the administration, talked about whether the United States was apologizing for some of the initial response to this. These were his comments this week.

(Videotape; Wednesday)

MR. MITT ROMNEY: The administration was wrong to stand by a statement sympathizing with those who had breached our embassy in Egypt instead of condemning their actions. I think it's a-- a-- a terrible course to-- for America to-- to stand in apology for our values.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: Our embassies did not stand up for speech-- free speech in this initial response to this violence. And the Republican charge is that it's weakness on the part of this administration that invites this kind of chaos, that the administration has not been tough enough on radical extremists that are beginning to take root in these countries. How do you respond to that?

MS. RICE: First of all, I think the American people and certainly our diplomats and-- and development experts who are putting their lives on the line around the world every day expect from our leadership unity in times of challenge and strong, steady, steadfast leadership of the sort that President Obama has been providing. With respect to this, I think, vacuous charge of weakness, let's-- let's recall, I think, the American people fully understand that this is an administration led by a president who said when he ran for office that he would take the fight to al Qaeda. We have decimated al Qaeda. Osama bin Laden is dead. He said we would end the war responsibly in Iraq. We've done that. He has restored relationships around the world. I spend every day up at the United Nations where I have to interact with 192 other countries. I know how well the United States is viewed. I know that our standing is much improved and it's translated into important support for strong American positions, for example with sanctions against Iran.

GREGORY: Was it inappropriate for Governor Romney to level the criticism he leveled?

MS. RICE: I'm not going to get into politics, David. That's not my role in this job. But I think the American people welcome and appreciate strong, steady, unified leadership, bipartisan in times of challenge. And for those men and women in our diplomatic service, including those we tragically lost, they look to our leadership to be unified and responsible.

GREGORY: Let's talk about another area where the administration is on the defensive in terms of leadership in the world, and that is the nuclear threat from Iran. Another area of tension between the United States and Israel. In just a couple of minutes we will show our interview with the prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu. And our viewers will see that. One aspect is how close Iran is getting to becoming a nuclear power. I asked him about that. I want to show you a piece of the interview and get your reaction to it.

(Videotape)

PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU (Prime Minister of Israel): I can tell you, David, that Iran has been placed with some clear red lines

on a few matters, and they have avoided crossing them. So I think that as they get closer and closer and closer to the achievement of the weapons-grade material, and they're very close, they're six months away from being about 90 percent of having the enriched uranium for an atom bomb, I think that you have to place that red line before them now, before it's-- it's too late.

GREGORY: As the prime minister of Israel, has Iran crossed your red line?

MR. NETANYAHU: Well, the way I would say it, David, is they are in the red zone. You know, they are in the last 20 yards. And you can't let them cross that goal line. You can't let them score a touchdown, because that would have unbelievable consequences, grievous consequences, for the peace and security of us all-- of the world really.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: What is President Obama's line in the sand, the point at which he says to Iran don't cross this with your nuclear program or there's going to be a military consequence?

MS. RICE: David, the president has been very, very clear. Our bottom line, if you want to call it a red line, president's bottom line has been that Iran will not acquire a nuclear weapon and we will take no option off the table to ensure that it does not acquire a nuclear weapon, including the military option.

GREGORY: The prime minister says...

MS. RICE: But...

GREGORY: ...they are acquiring.

MS. RICE: ...he's talking about a-- a red zone which is a new concept...

GREGORY: No, no, but he's talking about how close they are to actually becoming a nuclear power--having to develop a capacity to become a nuclear power.

MS. RICE: They're not there yet. They are not there yet. And our assessment is, and-- and we share this regularly with our Israeli counterparts in the intelligence and defense community, that there is time and space for the pressure we are mounting, which is unprecedented in terms of sanctions, to still yield results. This is not imminent. The window is not infinite, but let's be clear--the sanctions that-- that are now in place reached their high point in July. The-- the Iranian economy is suffering. It's shrinking for the first time. Negative one percent growth. The amount of production of Iranian oil has dropped 40 percent over the last several months. Their currency has plummeted 40 percent over the last several months. This pressure is even to use the Iranian's own words crippling.

GREGORY: But can you say...

MS. RICE: And we think...

GREGORY: ...that President Obama's strategy to keep Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon almost at the end of his first term is succeeding or failing?

MS. RICE: David, what is clear is Iran does not have a nuclear weapon. And that Iran is more isolated than ever internationally. The economic pressure it is facing is much greater than ever. When President Obama came to office the international community was divided about Iran. And Iran was internally very united. The exact opposite is the case today. The international community is united. We just had another strong resolution out of the IAEA Board of Governors. And the internal dynamics in Iran are-- are fracturing and the leadership is divided. We are committed and President Obama is committed to preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. It is not a policy of containment. But, David, the most difficult and profound decision that any president has to make is the decision to go to war. And this president is committed to exhausting pressure, economic pressure, and diplomacy while there is-- is still time before making a decision of such consequence.

GREGORY: Ambassador Rice, the debate continues. Thank you very much...

MS. RICE: Thank you.

GREGORY: ...for your views this morning.

Now to this looming nuclear threat from Iran from the Israeli perspective. There were new tensions between the Obama administration in Israel this week. Earlier, I spoke with the prime minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu about where things stand and whether he is trying to influence the outcome of our presidential campaign.

Prime Minister, welcome back to MEET THE PRESS.

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: Thank you. Good to be with you, David.

GREGORY: I want to talk specifically before we get to the questions of what's happening more broadly in the Middle East and the turmoil there this week about the threat from Iran. You spoke about that this week, and this question of whether Israel has to take matters into its own hands. And you launched pretty pointed criticism at the United States. I want to play a portion of what you said.

(Videotape; Monday)

PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU: The world tells Israel, wait. There's still time. And I say, wait for what? Wait until when? Those in the international community who refuse to put red lines before Iran don't have a moral right to place a red light before Israel.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: Prime Minister, I want to understand very clearly what your views are. Is it your view that the Obama administration is either unwilling or unable to stop Iran from becoming a nuclear power?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: Now first of all, President Obama and the U.S. administration have repeatedly said that Israel has the right to act by itself against any threat to defend itself. And I think that that remains our position. And for me, the issue is-- as the prime minister of a country that is threatened with annihilation by a regime that is racing a brutal regime in Tehran that is racing to develop nuclear bombs for that and, obviously, we-- we cannot delegate the job of stopping Iran if all else fails to someone else. That was the main point that I was saying there. It was directed at the general international community. A lot of leaders calling me telling me don't do it, it's not necessary. You know, the danger of acting is much greater than not acting. And I always say the danger of not acting in time is much greater because Iran with nuclear weapons would mean that the kind of fanaticism that you see storming your embassies would have a nuclear weapon. Don't let these fanatics have nuclear weapons.

GREGORY: But Prime Minister, let's be clear. You were upset with this administration. The Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had said in an interview that there were no deadlines by this administration in terms of what Iran should or shouldn't do by a date certain. That's what led to those remarks. And so my question still stands. Is it your view that this administration is either unwilling or unable to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: No. President Obama has said that he's determined to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons and I appreciate that and I respect that. I think implicit in that is that if you're determined to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons, it means you'll act before they get nuclear weapons. I just think that it's important to communicate to Iran that there is a line that they won't cross. I think a red line in this case works to reduce the chances of the need for military action because once the Iranians understand that there's no-- there's a line that they can't cross, they are not likely to cross it, you know, when President Kennedy set a red line in the Cuban missile crisis, he was criticized. But it turned out it didn't bring war, it actually pushed war back and probably purchased decades of peace with the Soviet Union. Conversely, when there was no American red line set before the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and maybe that war could have been avoided. And I can tell you David that Iran has been placed with some clear red lines on a few matters and they have avoided crossing them. So I think that as they get closer and closer and closer to the achievement of weapons grade material, and they are very close, they are six months away from being about ninety percent of having the enriched uranium for an atom bomb, I think that you have to place that red line before them now before it's-- it's too late. That was the point that I was making.

GREGORY: As a prime minister of Israel, has Iran crossed your red line?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: Well, the way I would say it David is they are in the red zone. You know, they are in the last 20 yards. And you can't let them cross that goal line. You can't let them score a touchdown because that would have unbelievable consequences, grievous consequences, for the peace and security of us all-- of the world really.

GREGORY: That seems to be a newer development from your way of thinking that they are now in a red zone. And to use-- to use the sports metaphor, you won't let them cross the-- the goal line. Is Israel closer to taking action into its own hands?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: We always reserve the right to act. But I think that if we are able to coordinate together a common position, we increase the chances that neither one of us will have to act. Iran is very cognizant of the fact of its degrees of freedom and as the IAEA report says not only have they not stopped, they have actually rushed forward-- they're rushing forward with their enrichment program. And I think it's very important to make it clear to them that they can't just proceed with impunity.

GREGORY: Your criticism, your calling on President Obama to set this red line, comes in the middle of a heated presidential campaign. You

understand the American political system very well. You're very sophisticated in that regard. In your view, would Governor Mitt Romney as President Romney make Israel safer? Would he take a harder line against Iran than President Obama in your judgment?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: God, I'm-- I'm not going to be drawn into the American election. And-- and what's guiding my statements are-- is not the American political calendar but the Iranian nuclear calendar. They're just-- you know, if they stop spinning the centrifuges for-- and took timeout for the American elections, I wouldn't have to talk. And I wouldn't have to raise this issue. But as the prime minister of Israel, knowing that this country committed to our destruction is getting closer to the goal of having weapons of mass destruction then I speak out. And it's got-- it's really not a partisan political issue. And I think it's important for anyone who is the president of the United States to be in that position of preventing Iran from having this nuclear weapons-- nuclear weapons capability. And I'm talking to the president. I just talked to him the other day. We are in close consultations. We're trying to prevent that. It's really not a partisan issue. It's a policy issue not a political issue.

GREGORY: Well, but it may not be a partisan issue. You have known Mitt Romney a long time. The reality is-- tell me if you disagree that Governor Romney just in an interview this week said that his position is very much the same as President Obama. They are both committed to preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Not just as an impartial observer, as the prime minister of Israel, do you agree with that that both the president and his challenger have the same view with regard to preventing Iran from going nuclear?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: I have no doubt that they are equally committed to preventing that. It's a-- it's a vital American interest. It's a-- it's an existential interest on my case so, this isn't the issue. We are united on this across the board.

GREGORY: Why can't Iran be contained just as the Soviet Union was? There are those in your country and in the United States who believe that a containment strategy would actually work?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: I think Iran is very different. They put their zealotry above their survival. They have suicide bombers all over the place. I wouldn't rely on their rationality, you know, you-- since the advent of nuclear weapons, you had countries that had access to nuclear weapons who always made a careful calculation of cost and benefit. But Iran is guided by a leadership with an unbelievable fanaticism. It's the same fanaticism that you see storming your embassies today. You want these fanatics to have nuclear weapons? I mean, I've heard some people suggest, David, I actually I read this in the American press. They said, well, you know, if you take action, that's-- that's a lot worse than having Iran with nuclear weapons. Some have even said that Iran with nuclear weapons would stabilize the Middle East-- stabilize the Middle East. I-- I think the people who say this have set a new standard for human stupidity. We have to stop them. Don't rely on containment. That is not the American policy. It would be wrong. It would be a grave, grave mistake. Don't let these fanatics have nuclear weapons. It's terrible for Israel and it's terrible for America. It's terrible for the world.

GREGORY: Prime Minister, one more question on the American election. You have been accused this week by pundits in this country of trying to interfere in this presidential election, siding with Governor Mitt Romney. Now, Governor Romney for a year, and he said it in his convention speech, has said, quote, "President Obama has thrown allies like Israel under the bus." Do you agree or disagree with Governor Romney's charge? It's a serious charge.

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: Well, you're-- you're trying to get me into the-- into the American election and I'm not going to do that. The relationship between Israel and the United States is a bond of-- it's just a very powerful bond. It was, it is, and will be and will continue to be. And I-- I can tell you there's no one-- there's no leader in the world who's more appreciative than me of the strength of this alliance. It's very strong. There's no one in Israel who appreciates more than me the importance of American support for Israel. It's not a partisan issue. In fact, we cherish the bipartisan support of Democrats and Republicans alike. This is critical for us.

GREGORY: But prime minister, with respect, if I may just interrupt you...

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: And-- and I think it's critical that we take...

GREGORY: I think this is a very important point because you say you don't want to interfere in the election. There are tens of millions of Americans who are watching that speech, who hear that rhetoric, who hear that charge, who may not understand the complexities of this issue. You are the leader of the Jewish people. You say this is not a partisan issue. You get billions of dollars from direct foreign investment from this country, hundreds of millions of dollars from Americans, Jews and Christians alike from this country. It seems to me for you to remain silent on whether this administration has thrown Israel under the bus is tantamount to agreeing with the sentiment. So where do you come down on that specific charge against President Obama?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: Now, there you go again, David, you're trying to draw me into something that-- that is simply not-- not the case and it's not my position. My position is that we-- we have strong cooperation. We'll continue to cooperate. We're the best of allies. And Israel is the one reliable ally of the United States in the Middle East...

GREGORY: So President Obama has not thrown Israel under the bus?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: ...if that wasn't understood until yesterday. So it's-- it's-- there's-- there's no bus, and we're not going to get into that discussion, except to say one thing. We have a strong alliance and we're going to continue to have a strong alliance. I think the important question is where does the-- the only bus that is really important is the Iranian nuclear bus. That's the one that we have to-- to derail. And that's my interest. That's my-- my only interest.

GREGORY: Final question on the broader Middle East and what we're seeing this week. This anti-American and indeed anti-Israeli rage throughout the Middle East attacking our embassy, killing a United States ambassador as you well know. What has been unleashed and what can United States and its allies specifically do to contain it?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: Well, look, I-- I-- I think people focus on the spark. The spark of reprehensible and irresponsible film is a-- is a spark, but it's not-- it doesn't explain anything. I mean, it doesn't explain 9/11. It doesn't explain the decades of animosity and the grievances that go back centuries. In fact, there's a tinderbox of hatred here from a virulent strain of Islam that takes moderate Muslims and Arabs and attacks them first but seeks to deprive all of us of the basic-- the basic values that we have. They're against the human rights. They're against the rights of women. They're against freedom of religion. They're against freedom of speech and freedom of expression. They're against all the things that we value. They're against tolerance. They're against-- they're against pluralism, and they're against freedom. And they're-- they're-- they view not your policies but you, the very existence of United States and its values, and by extension Israel. They view that as an intolerable crime. And we have to understand that. We have to deal with it. And we have to be the close support because in-- in this vast expanse of land, you can understand why they are so-- so antagonistic to us because for them we are you and you are us. And at least on this point they're right.

GREGORY: Finally, prime minister, did you feel snubbed not getting a face-to-face meeting with President Obama in New York during the upcoming U.N. meetings? Would you like to have that face-to-face encounter? Would it be helpful to your relationship at this point?

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: You know, I'm always pleased and-- and happy to have a conversation with President Obama. He's-- I think he's met me more than any other leader in the world and I-- I appreciate that. We've had our discussions. Our-- our schedules on this visit didn't work out. I come to New York and he leaves New York. But we continue in close consultations. We have urgent business, Israel and America, to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons. I think it's important to delineate a red line for Iran so we're not faced with a conundrum of what to do if we don't place a red line and they just proceed to the bomb.

GREGORY: Prime minister, thank you very much for your time.

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: Thank you, to all of you.

GREGORY: Coming up next, our political roundtable on the political impact of this turmoil in the Middle East. Is it a case of weakness on the part of this administration? Did Governor Romney go too far in that criticism? Our political roundtable is here and we'll weigh in. Democratic congressman from Minnesota, Keith Ellison; Chair of the Homeland Security Committee, Congressman Peter King of New York; *The Washington Post's*, Bob Woodward; Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic* magazine; and our own Andrea Mitchell.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: Coming up our political roundtable. Was this week that 3:00 AM phone call moment for Romney? What is his response to the turmoil in the Middle East say about his readiness to be president? Our roundtable weighs in up next after this brief break.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: And we're back with our political roundtable. Joining me national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, a journalist who'd spent his career covering the Middle East, Jeff Goldberg; NBC's chief foreign affairs correspondent Andrea Mitchell; associate editor for *The Washington Post* and author of the new groundbreaking book *The Price of Politics*, Bob Woodward; Chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, Republican Congressman Peter King of New York; and the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress, Minnesota Congressman Keith Ellison. Welcome to all of you. These are very difficult times for this country and for the Middle East. There's a question I think that Americans have of what is going on here. Why is this happening? And it's happening, Jeff Goldberg, in a heated presidential debate. And so you have accusations and response, and we've seen that play out already in the course of this hour. Liz Cheney, the daughter of the former vice president, launched a very serious attack that indeed Governor Romney amplified on. And she wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*--I want to show it to our viewers and get discussion about it here. In too many parts of the world, she writes, America is no longer viewed as a reliable ally or an enemy to be feared... Nor do our adversaries any longer fear us. Ask the mobs in Cairo who attacked our embassy or the Libyan mobs who killed our diplomats at the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. Ask the Iranians who make unhindered daily progress towards obtaining a nuclear weapon.

MR. JEFF GOLDBERG (National Correspondent, *The Atlantic*): Well, I mean, a couple of quick points. The first is, you know, to be fair, 9/11 happened during the Bush administration, the Bush-Cheney administration. So it's not as if people-- Muslim radicals feared the United States during that period, not when they were killing thousands of American troops in Iraq certainly. I mean, the larger point is that-- that, you know,

there's a tendency, especially seven weeks out from an election, to turn this in-- turn everything that happens in the world into an election issue. There are some very, very deep and troubling things going on in-- in the Middle East that have very little to do with what a president does or doesn't do. I mean, let's-- let's be fair about this. You-- you-- you have a complete upheaval in the Middle East. You don't have American policymakers being able to shape the way Muslims think about the world, about modernity, about the United States. So-- so to blame the president for-- for an attack on-- on these embassies, I think, is a bit much.

GREGORY: Congressman...

REP. PETER KING (R-NY/Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security): Yeah.

GREGORY: ...as a Republican here, supporter of Governor Romney...

REP. KING: Yes.

GREGORY: ...is this American weakness that brought this on? Is that the Republican view? Is that what the view of President Romney would be?

REP. KING: Well, my view is it was a large component of it. There has been-- this president's policy-- President Obama's policy has been confusing. It's been apologetic, and it's been misguided. From the day he started his apology tour back in 2009 where he was, no matter what people say, apologizing for America, somehow suggesting that we've been anti-Islam until he became the president throughout-- the fact that-- even talking about Iraq, the way he took our troops out of Iraq without even getting the status of forces agreement. He was given a glide path in Iraq. And yet he pulled the troops out, brags about the fact that troops are out, gives a definite date for getting out in Afghanistan. What he is doing by that is telling our allies they can't trust us and he's also telling unaligned that the U.S. is not a reliable ally. And the fact that you would have the prime minister of Israel on this show explaining his relationship with the president of the United States at a time of such turmoil in the Middle East, we have never had a situation like this where there has been such a disconnect between the U.S. president and the Israeli prime minister. And the fact that he won't even meet with him at the U.N., while he's going to meet with President Morsi, sends terrible signals.

GREGORY: Well, to-- to be fair, the prime minister of Israel did not describe that as a stub-- snub in that interview.

REP. KING: I'm saying it. I'm saying, I'm saying.

GREGORY: You're saying, okay. Congressman, your response?

REP. KEITH ELLISON (D-MN): Well, it's ridiculous. The president has been consistent. He's been steady. And he's had progress in the policy wins in the Middle East. I mean, this is a seriously deeply rooted phenomenon, the Arab Spring that is going to be unfolding for a long time. And the last thing we need is to start making quick emo-- emotionally-charged decisions. We need consistent steady leadership like the president has shown.

GREGORY: But there is a policy component, Andrea and Bob, to this. The *New York Times* writes about it in an analysis piece this morning. I want to put a portion of that on the screen because it does provide some context here. The upheaval over an anti-Islam video has suddenly become Mr. Obama's most serious foreign policy crisis of the election season and a range of analysts say it presents questions about central tenets of his Middle East policy: Did he do enough during the Arab Spring to help the transition to democracy from autocracy? Has he drawn a hard enough line against Islamic extremists? Did his administration fail to address security concerns?

MS. ANDREA MITCHELL (Host, "ANDREA MITCHELL REPORTS"): Well, first of all, I think we have to exce-- concede that George Herbert Walker Bush's relationship with the then prime minister of Israel was arguably much worse than what we're seeing now. So, Republicans as well as Democrats have had difficulty, Congressman, in the past with Israel. That..

REP. KING: It's always the post-9/11 world.

MS. MITCHELL: ..but that said...

REP. KING: There's never been a relationship like this.

MS. MITCHELL: ...that said. I think there can be a legitimate criticism that this president has not handled the Israeli-Palestinian issue well, but the Arab Spring has been a much greater, much broader troubling issue that arguably not any American president could handle very effectively. That is not the argument. That is not the policy argument that-- that Mitt Romney has made. Mitt Romney's-- the criticism of Mitt Romney is coming largely from many Republicans whom I talked to, foreign policy experts, who say that in the middle of the crisis when the state department did not know where Ambassador Stevens was, when the body was missing, that he came out with a written statement and doubled down on it the next morning and that it was not presidential, it did not show leadership. That is the criticism...

REP. KING: When he put out the statement, he didn't know that the ambassador had been shot.

MS. MITCHELL: But then he shouldn't have put out a statement, you know, the argue...

REP. KING: Well, first up-- that's exactly the problem. Entire project-- I mean, if you don't know something, how can you-- I mean, it's not (Unintelligible).

MS. MITCHELL: But silence is often a good choice. Peggy Noonan said that as well.

REP. ELLISON: What about waiting until you know more? I mean, what about Reagan? Reagan said, you know, when we have a crisis like this, we should all come together as Americans and not sort of-- divide up politically and try to seek a-- a point.

REP. KING: You know, sometimes wait...

REP. ELLISON: That was in-- that was a-- that was a sad moment.

REP. KING: President Obama waited three days after the underwear bomber before he made a statement, and then he came out and said, this was a sole individual...

GREGORY: All right, let me get Bob to weigh in.

REP. KING: ...al Qaeda operation.

MR. BOB WOODWARD (Associate Editor, *Washington Post*): There's a way to look at this neutrally, and I-- I just don't think the charge of weakness will stick. I mean, Obama's been tough on these things. Let's be realistic. The extremists in the Middle East who are causing all of this trouble are extremists. And no Republican, no Democratic president is going to be able to control them. The question is, what's the policy and what's the response? And you deal in the intelligence world and you ask the experts about this and they'll say you never know. Ten people are going to come together and take over an embassy, shoot someone and so forth. So the idea that government can-- has the puppet strings here is- is just--

(Cross talk)

GREGORY: But couldn't we've done well with-- well, but let's get-- gentleman, let's get to the point. Where...

MR. GOLDBERG: Yeah.

GREGORY: Where are the extremists who are-- who are protesting about the fact that Muslims are being killed in Syria every day, as you don't see those protests? Is this about the United States or is it about them?

MR. GOLDBERG: It's about everything. I mean, the truth is it's about everything. It's unfolding. It'll be unfolding for a generation. And you're right. I mean, you don't see-- you don't see that level of anxiety directed at Syria. Hundred-- in the last week, hundreds of Syrian Muslims have been killed by the Syrian regime. And you don't see Syrian embassies being attacked. Obviously-- obviously-- obviously, if you're-- you know, we talked so much about the Arab street, how the Arab street feels about America. We-- we have to start talking about the American street too, because this is going to have consequences for these governments that we support. You know, we Americans see these countries that are-- that we provide billions of dollars who're not protecting our embassies, and they're eventually going to say, the American people can say enough already with this.

REP. ELLISON: This is a good time to realize that the so-called Arab street is not one monolithic thing. You have some people in, say, Libya, for example, who are pro-- holding up signs, apologizing for what happened to Chris Stevens.

GREGORY: Right. We have some of them. Yeah.

REP. ELLISON: Yeah. And-- and-- and, we-- we need to understand that this is not-- everybody's not on the same side. You have some radicals who want to push back. Some con-- some of-- some loyalists from the old regime, some extremists, who want to exploit the situation, and you have people who want a Democratic society. They're both contesting for who's going to come out and the United States should stay on their side.

REP. KING: But-- but how do we appeal to the wrong people in the Middle East by somehow exalting this whole-- this whole idea of the video being the cause of the-- of the riot?

REP. ELLISON: It's a spark. It's not a cause.

REP. KING: Okay. But for us to be saying somehow putting that on the equivalence of the American policy or to say that our policy in this country can be determined by a fanatical Christian minister in the South or radical Islamist mobs in the Middle East, then I think, the president can do more.

MS. MITCHELL: I-- I agree with that.

REP. KING: The president should be dealing with the--

GREGORY: But, Congressman, is it responsible for Mitt Romney to say that a President Romney could have stopped this from happening?

REP. KING: I think it's responsible for him to say that he would set a policy which would not be as confusing as this one. Why (Unintelligible) with President Morsi? Why didn't the next day the president even mention President Morsi? He come out to not say a word about the fact that our supposed ally--he doesn't even know if he's an ally or not--was getting a billion dollars not to defend our embassy in Cairo. The president did not mention that.

REP. ELLISON: But when the president called-- but when the president called, Morsi listened.

REP. KING: But for the single (cross talk) said nothing about it...

REP. ELLISON: And I-- and I wouldn't...

(Cross talk)

REP. KING: No, everyone is being critical of Mitt Romney.

GREGORY: Okay, good.

REP. KING: President Obama made his statement, he did not even mention the failure of leadership in Egypt.

MS. MITCHELL: Well, Congressman, you're absolutely correct. I think that it is easy for the administration to try to point to the film. There is a much broader issue, as Jeffrey and-- and Bob has-- have been pointing to. The world is changing and it is changing too rapidly for any American leadership to figure out what to do. There is going to be a big argument over foreign aid, you know that. And whether or not that is even a sensible argument is another question. They have a big problem with Morsi. Morsi needs economic aid. He has, I've been told, reached out to the New York economic club. He wants to give a speech here in 10 days. He knows he needs the IMF. He knows he needs the United States. But he's trying at the same time to placate the radical elements in the brotherhood.

GREGORY: Let me...

MR. WOODWARD: But-- but the core problem is there're angry people out there. And you can't identify them. And the-- the idea that you're going to have a government policy to deal with angry people in a-- in a way that will suppress them just is not going to happen.

GREGORY: Let me get a break in here-- let me get a break in here. We'll come back with the roundtable. More on this, the political impact right in the middle of the campaign. More with our roundtable right after this.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: We're back with our roundtable. Some context here--look at this polling from CNN/ORC--better at handling foreign policy, a big advantage for President Obama as we go into these presidential debates. Jeffrey Goldberg?

MR. GOLDBERG: You know, I-- I was troubled by something that Susan Rice said before, which is talking about how people are offended by this movie and sort of apologizing for this-- this film. I think there's a-- there's a perpetual grievance machine working in the Middle East. Bob-- Bob points this out. People will be angry no matter what. And-- and at a certain point, I think the administration should just say, look, we have free speech in America. It is part of our value system. You know, opp-- opposition to blasphemy is part of your value system and we respect that as long as you do it peacefully, but we have free speech in our country and we're going to stand up for our liberal western values.

MR. KING: Suppose tomorrow with Salman Rushdie, we going to back down on that also, yeah.

MR. GOLDBERG: No. Exactly. You want to be-- you want to stand very strongly. And you want to also support liberal thought in the Middle East and that means engaging with-- you have to remember most Muslims in the Middle East aren't attacking American embassies, many want to be-- have more liberal open society.

GREGORY: Congressman Ellison, is our only leverage in the United States money and foreign aid?

REP. ELLISON: Absolutely not. We have a lot of influence in terms of culture, in terms of just the way America is a democratic society. We should use that. They, as a matter of fact, all the protests we saw were for people reaching for a greater level of democracy. But foreign aid is a part of it. And I think that for us to threaten to snatch aid now is dangerous and a bad idea.

GREGORY: Andrea Mitchell, the question of Iran as well, I want to get reaction to the prime minister. He said something among the significant things, there-- they have an equal commitment, he said, Mitt Romney and President Obama, to prevent Iran from going nuclear. That is not the wedge that Governor Romney has been arguing. He has said, "You re-elect President Obama they go nuclear, you elect me they do not."

MS. MITCHELL: And yet Mitt Romney himself misspoke apparently in another interview saying that he agrees with President Obama on what that imaginary red line is. I thought it was very interesting that Prime Minister Netanyahu said they are in a red zone. The football analogy, yes. But he was trying to smooth over the differences. But there are very real differences. Real differences in that while President Obama has made a commitment to stop them from weaponizing, from getting a-- from going nuclear, they believe somehow in this notion that they will have the intelligence, they will know when the Ayatollah makes a political decision, and they will still have the time. And arguably in the past, we've learned that intelligence is not that precise.

MR. WOODWARD: There is so much turns on the intelligence. It was this interesting your discussion with the Israeli Prime Minister, and he said, well, at six months and they'll have 90 percent. And the Ambassador Rice said, well, it's not imminent that they're going to get the bomb. If you study intelligence, as I have for about 40 years, and Jeffrey and I were talking about, some day we're going to write a book called "The Unintelligence of Intelligence" because it's just often wrong. And people are surprised. And we're-- you know, deep, deep uncertainty about all of this-- 90 percent, six months, it's not going to happen. We don't know.

GREGORY: What about-- what about this interference in our election? You're curious about that from both of you, because he takes on-- well, I-- I pressed him on that charge.

MR. GOLDBERG: Well, there's-- there's two issues. One is a legitimate issue, which is this debate over red lines. This is the debate that Obama and Netanyahu should have, a discussion, in private. And-- and that's-- that's legitimate for-- for Netanyahu to raise. What's illegitimate, and-- and let me put this as-- as bluntly as I can. I've been watching the relationship between the U.S. and Israel for 20 years, more than 20 years, very seriously and I've never seen an Israeli prime minister mismanage the relationship with the United States or with the administration the way this prime minister has. Obama is not blameless. The first year, the peace process was a disaster. But, you know, one-- one person here is the-- one person here is the senior partner, one is the-- the junior partner, and Netanyahu has turned this into a story about himself and Obama.

REP. KING: No, I-- I disagree. I'm-- I'm not here to criticize our president. The fact is in 2009 when he went to the Middle East and suggested a moral equivalency between the Iranians and the Israelis, when he was harping on against the Israelis, the fact is the Israeli government does not trust the American government. And that's really the issue. Not when the red line is going to be or where it's going to be. The fact is there was not a trust between the Israeli prime minister and the American President. And this is a President who'd come in saying he was going to restore harmony among nations, he was going to have better relationship with our overseas allies...

MS. MITCHELL: But...

REP. KING: ...and adversaries.

GREGORY: Are you double down on the comment that this President has thrown Israel under the bus?

REP. KING: He has not shown-- yes, I will. In the context of politics, yes, he has, absolutely.

REP. ELLISON: That's-- that's absolutely wrong.

REP. KING: He absolutely has.

REP. ELLISON: There's no evidence to that.

REP. KING: The way...

GREGORY: What does that mean in the context of politics, it's either true or it's not.

REP. KING: It-- it is true.

REP. ELLISON: It's not true.

REP. KING: It is true. Let me tell you why it's true. You had an Israeli prime minister being-- when he went to the White House being put off to eat by himself, being ignored by the president. You have the president refusing to sit down with him at the U.N. This is an ally.

REP. ELLISON: Well...

REP. KING: He's not going to treat Morsi this way.

REP. ELLISON: According to...

REP. KING: He's not going to treat the Arab League this way.

REP. ELLISON: According to...

REP. KING: To treat an ally like that is, yeah, like putting him under the bus.

GREGORY: All right. Go ahead, Congressman.

REP. ELLISON: ---military leaders the security relationship is as good as it ever has been.

REP. KING: We're talking about diplomatic relationship.

GREGORY: Hold on, let him...

REP. ELLISON: And-- and-- no, no, no. And so-- and so the point is this is a sad reality where we are putting Israel as a political football in an election, it should not be done.

REP. KING: The president...

REP. ELLISON: And-- and as a matter of fact, I think that the-- that the president-- President Netanyahu (sic) ought to be a little bit more careful (cross talk) himself.

GREGORY: Andrea, and I really-- in ten seconds, what do you look for this week as we move beyond, as this conversation moves?

MS. MITCHELL: I think there are more security challenges. You've got embassies shut down. The marines are going to be more engaged in various places. This is a crisis. And it could rebound against President Obama.

GREGORY: All right. Before we go and take a break, I wanted to let you know that you can catch more of Bob Woodward in our take two web extra, which will be posted on our press pass blog this afternoon. We're going to talk in depth about his new book, *The Price of Politics*. You can read an excerpt on our-- of the book on our website as well, that's meetthepressnbc.com. We'll be back with more in just a moment.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: Before we go this morning, a couple of programming notes. You can watch this week's press pass conversation on our blog as well, a lot going on on the blog. Some straight talk from the much talked about duo themselves. Simpson-Bowles, Former Senator Alan Simpson, former White House chief of staff for President Clinton Erskine Bowles, that's at meetthepressnbc.com.

Also Thursday on ROCK CENTER WITH BRIAN WILLIAMS, Ted Koppel goes toe-to-toe with the lives of Bill O'Reilly, Ann Coulter and Bill Maher for a provocative new look at the role of openly partisan media and at the role it's playing in our society. That's on ROCK CENTER Thursday at 10:00 P.M. Eastern, 9:00 Central.

That is all for us today. We'll be back next week. If it's Sunday, it's MEET THE PRESS. And as we leave you, we remember the lives of Ambassador Chris Stevens and the three other Americans that were lost this week in the attack on our consulate in Libya. Our thoughts and prayers of course are with their families.



From around the web

Can You Guess the 10 States That Are Most Dependent on the Federal Government? (Personal Finance | Wall St. Cheat Sheet)

New Details About Kidnapped Teen Abigail Hernandez Are Heartbreaking (Stirring Daily)

More from NBCNews.com

[?]

New video of Michael Brown shooting witnesses in disbelief (theGrio)

Ikea reveals 75% of catalog images are CGI (TODAY)

Best and worst states to have a baby (TODAY)

Congressional reaction to Obama's speech (NBC News)

[A New Kind of CPAP to Help You Breathe and Sleep Better](#) (Easy Breathe)

[These 10 Countries Are the Most Corrupt in the Whole World](#) (Politics Cheat Sheet)

[Murdered 14-Year-Old Sends Horrifying Text Right Before Her Death](#) (Stirring Daily)

[What dialect do you speak? A map of American English](#) (The Washington Post)

[This Famous Toilet-Paper Maker Is Ditching the Cardboard Tube](#) (NBC News)

[NY soldier missing since World War II identified](#) (NBC News)