

In his first prime-time news conference, President Obama said he has no timetable for the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan.

Even as he tried to focus the nation on his plan for addressing an economic crisis that he warned will become a "catastrophe" without action by Congress, Obama vowed to stop al Qaeda from operating "with impunity" in Afghanistan and said his administration would be "looking for openings" to move "in a new direction" U.S. policy toward Iran.

"My bottom line is that we cannot allow al Qaeda to operate. We cannot have those safe havens in that region. And we're going to have to work both smartly and effectively, but with consistency in order to make sure that those safe havens don't exist," Obama said Monday evening.

"I do not have yet a timetable for how long that's going to take. What I know is I'm not going to make -- I'm not going to allow al Qaeda or [Osama] bin Laden to operate with impunity, planning attacks on the U.S. homeland."

On Iran, Obama said he envisioned looking for "openings that can be created where we can start sitting across the table, face to face" with Iranian leaders.

An openness to starting a dialogue with Iran is a marked shift from that of Obama's predecessor, [George W. Bush](#) , who labeled Iran part of an "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address.

Obama said that "direct diplomacy" would require understanding by Iran that the United States finds "the funding of terrorist organizations unacceptable, that we're clear about the fact that a nuclear Iran could set off a nuclear arms race in the region that would be profoundly destabilizing."

His rhetoric echoed an early campaign signal that his administration would sit down with the leaders of Iran within the first year of his presidency, though Obama did not reiterate that timeline on Monday.

While most of the questions he fielded from the press corps centered on the economic crisis and the stimulus bill, Obama's most revealing answers came on foreign and military policy.

He said he has not yet made a determination about whether to overturn the Bush administration policy banning cameras from filming or photographing the flag-draped coffins of American servicemen killed in Iraq and Afghanistan when they return to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware.

"We are in the process of reviewing those policies in conversations with the Department of Defense, so I don't want to give you an answer now before I've evaluated that review and understand all the implications involved," he said.

Obama took the question after noting it's grim timing, coming on the same day he was informed of the death of four American service members in Iraq.

The president opened the press conference with an aggressive appeal for action on the stimulus bill, citing an escalating shedding of jobs from the economy.

"If there's anyone out there who still doesn't believe this constitutes a full-blown crisis, I suggest speaking to one of the millions of Americans whose lives have been turned upside down because they don't know where their next paycheck is coming from," he said.

Obama addressed criticism of the more than \$800 billion stimulus package (HR 1), saying the private sector is not equipped to recover without government intervention.

"It is only government that can break the vicious cycle where lost jobs lead to people spending less money which leads to even more layoffs," he said. "And breaking that cycle is exactly what the plan that's moving through Congress is designed to do."

After shifting away from early calls for bipartisanship on the stimulus bill and watching just three Senate Republicans back his bill, Obama was asked whether he had misjudged the possibility of reaching across the partisan divide.

"I don't think I underestimated it," he said. "There have been a lot of bad habits built up here in Washington."

He said his efforts to cultivate bipartisanship, such as meeting with House and Senate Republicans, were aimed at long-term trust-building, not short-term gain.

Obama called on lawmakers to confront the challenges before the nation and "break out of some of the ideological rigidity and gridlock that we've been carrying around for too long."

In responding, Obama, nonetheless, fired off a few shots at Republicans.

"When I hear that from folks who presided over a doubling of the national debt, I just want them not to engage in some revisionist history," he said.

Republicans didn't take long to return the volley.

"There is an earnest difference between the current stimulus bill and what many others, including myself, believe is the most effective use of taxpayer's money to stimulate the economy," Rep. [Lee Terry](#) , a Nebraska Republican, said in a written statement. "The president I and want a quick recovery, but I just don't believe this bill will accomplish what we want."

Obama declined to close the door on a call made earlier in the day by Sen. [Patrick J. Leahy](#), D-Vt., for establishing a panel to investigate actions taken by the Bush administration.

"My view is also that nobody's above the law and, if there are clear instances of wrongdoing, that people should be prosecuted just like any ordinary citizen," Obama said. "But that, generally speaking, I'm more interested in looking forward than I am in looking backwards."

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