

# Obama administration bows to Israel on eve of speech by Netanyahu

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On the eve of a provocative speech to the US Congress by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Obama administration officials bent over backwards to proclaim their commitment to support and defend the state of Israel.

Netanyahu organized the speech in a deal with Republican House Speaker John Boehner without informing the White House, an unprecedented violation of international protocol. The Israeli prime minister's aim in delivering the address, scheduled for Tuesday morning, is, on the one hand, to scuttle any negotiated agreement over Iran's nuclear program, and, on the other, to raise his own flagging fortunes in an Israeli election to take place in little more than two weeks.

On the eve of his speech to a joint session of Congress, Netanyahu spoke to the annual meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the premier pro-Israel lobby in the US. Netanyahu declared that his impending speech before Congress "is not intended to show any disrespect to President Obama or the esteemed office that he holds." He added, "I have great respect for both."

This is entirely disingenuous. Netanyahu is deliberately provoking Obama by delivering a speech against his administration's express wishes. He is betting that a confrontation with a US president who is widely unpopular in Israel will serve to mobilize his right-wing base in the upcoming election.

Recent polls have shown Netanyahu either in a dead heat with or trailing his main opponent, the Labor Party's Isaac Herzog. The latter has condemned Netanyahu's decision to address the US Congress as "endangering US support for Israel."

Netanyahu told AIPAC, "The purpose of my speech is to speak up about a potential deal with Iran that could threaten Israel's future." Before flying to the US, the

Israeli prime minister self-servingly described his controversial trip as a "fateful, even historic, mission."

The Israeli government has long held the position that any deal with Iran on its nuclear program is unacceptable. It has persistently pushed to draw the US into a military confrontation with Iran.

While both Tel Aviv and Washington have charged that Iran has used its nuclear program to pursue the development of nuclear weapons, Tehran has insisted that it is directed solely toward peaceful purposes.

Iran and the P5+1 group—comprised of the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—are set to resume negotiations this week in Switzerland. The outlines appear to be taking shape of a potential deal that would freeze Iran's nuclear enrichment for a lengthy period—according to some reports, for ten years—in exchange for the lifting of punishing economic sanctions imposed upon the country.

Iranian Prime Minister Javad Zarif stated Monday that any deal would be contingent on the swift ending of sanctions. "If they want an agreement, sanctions must go," he said. "We believe all sanctions must be lifted."

Ultimately, under the deal, Iran's nuclear status would be normalized based on its status as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Israel, which has refused to sign the treaty, rejects any such normalization. With its arsenal of hundreds of warheads, the Zionist state is determined to maintain its monopoly on nuclear weapons in the Middle East, not as a means of self-defense, but as a military club to impose its will on neighboring countries.

While the Netanyahu government and the Zionist lobby continuously insist that Tehran is bent on Israel's annihilation, it is Israel that constantly threatens unilateral military aggression against Iran, while using

assassinations and other covert operations to destabilize its government.

The Israeli press reported Monday that Washington and Tel Aviv have ceased sharing intelligence on Iran's nuclear program. One of the fears expressed by the Obama administration is that Netanyahu will use his speech to Congress to disclose classified information about the talks in Switzerland in an attempt to derail any agreement. Last month, US officials charged that the Israeli regime had leaked such information to the Israeli media for the same purpose.

Netanyahu is also expected to use his appearance before the US Congress to lend support to two bills that would impose further US sanctions upon Iran and give Congress the power to block the treaty. Obama has vowed to veto the measures.

With the controversy over Netanyahu's speech being described as a low point in US-Israeli relations, the Obama administration bent over backwards on the eve of the address to affirm its unwavering commitment to Israel's security. It also renewed threats against Iran.

Washington provides Israel with \$3.1 billion in annual aid, most of it military, and gives Tel Aviv virtually unconditional support in the United Nations and other international bodies.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest told reporters Monday that a nuclear deal with Iran would not preclude new rounds of sanctions or even a US military attack on the country. In the event Tehran was deemed to be out of compliance with the agreement, he said, "We can add additional sanctions to the mix if we feel like that would be successful." He added, "We'll even have a military option that continues to be available to the president."

Samantha Power, the US ambassador to the United Nations, was dispatched to the AIPAC conference Monday to deliver a speech implicitly threatening US military action against Iran. "Talks, no talks, agreement, no agreement, the United States will take any steps that are necessary to protect our national security and that of our closest ally," she said. "We believe that diplomacy is the preferred route to secure our shared aim, but if it should fail, we know the stakes of a nuclear-armed Iran as well as everyone here. We will not let it happen." Power's bellicose remarks won a standing ovation from the right-wing Zionist audience.

Earlier, Secretary of State John Kerry delivered remarks at the annual session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva in which he denounced the body for its "obsession with Israel" and an "unbalanced focus" on the Israeli government's wars, occupations and apartheid policies.

Kerry's defense of Israel came just as the Palestine Liberation Organization announced that it will bring its first complaint over Israeli war crimes to the International Criminal Court on April 1. The case will deal with last summer's Israeli war on Gaza, which claimed the lives of 2,200 Palestinians, most of them civilians. The PLO is also planning to sue over Israel's illegal building of settlements in the occupied territories.

Both Washington and Tel Aviv vehemently opposed the move by the PLO in January to join the ICC. In retaliation, Israel has withheld millions of dollars in monthly taxes that it collects for the West Bank's Palestinian Authority, throwing it into deep financial crisis.

While much has been made of a supposed Democratic Party boycott of Netanyahu's speech, as of late Monday, just 30 members of the House and two senators were reportedly planning to skip the speech—out of a total of 535 members in the two houses. Even those criticizing the Israeli prime minister's actions are doing so from the standpoint of his injecting "partisanship" into the US-Israeli alliance, not from the standpoint of opposing the crimes for which Israel is responsible.



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