

Boehner Defends Netanyahu's Upcoming Congressional Speech

U.S. House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner on Thursday challenged an assertion by the Obama administration that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's upcoming speech to Congress about Iran's nuclear program would be destructive to relations.

"The president's national security advisor says it's destructive for the prime minister of Israel to address the United States Congress. I couldn't disagree more," Boehner said at his weekly news conference.

"The American people and both parties in Congress have always stood with Israel and nothing, and no one, could get in the way," the Republican leader said.

Boehner broke precedent by inviting the Israeli leader to address Congress without consulting the White House or Democratic lawmakers. President Barack Obama and other Democrats have accused Netanyahu and Republicans of using the speech to inject partisan politics into the relationship.

Tuesday's speech will be the third by Netanyahu to a joint meeting of the Senate and U.S. House of Representatives. Britain's World War Two prime minister, Winston Churchill, is the only other international leader to have done so three times.

Several Democrats have said they will skip the speech. Some said, like Obama, that it is inappropriate for Netanyahu to address the U.S. Congress just two weeks before Israeli elections. Others said they do not want a foreign leader weighing in on U.S. foreign affairs.

U.S. lawmakers could have an impact on the course of the

nuclear talks. The Senate is due to vote within weeks on whether to impose extra sanctions on Iran. The White House has said this could harm the talks.

Secretary of State John Kerry met behind closed doors with Senate Democrats on Thursday. Lawmakers said he was not overly optimistic about the Iran negotiations but he opposed new sanctions and a proposal to have Congress vote on any nuclear agreement.

Several senators said Kerry told them to make up their own minds about whether to attend Netanyahu's speech.

As partisan rancor over the speech rose this week, Obama's national security adviser Susan Rice said in a television interview that it would be destructive to reduce the relationship to a partisan political issue.

There was one sign of bipartisanship on Thursday when Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced that Netanyahu would meet with him and Democratic Senate leader Harry Reid after the speech next Tuesday.

The White House said Rice and U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power would address the annual convention next week of the AIPAC pro-Israel lobby group, where Netanyahu is also speaking.

Boehner expressed doubts about the nuclear talks as he defended the invitation to Netanyahu. "What is destructive in my view is making a bad deal that paves the way for a nuclear Iran. That's destructive," he said.

Boehner said it was important for the U.S. public to hear Netanyahu talk about the "grave threats" facing Israel. "I'm glad that most of my colleagues, Democrats and Republicans, will be there to hear what he has to say," he said.