

Obama Rebukes Israel's Netanyahu Over Iran Speech to Congress

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned the United States on Tuesday that it was negotiating a bad deal with Iran that paved the way to a “nuclear nightmare,” drawing a rebuke from President Barack Obama and exposing the depth of a rift.

Delivering dueling messages within hours of each other, Netanyahu made his case against Obama's Iran diplomacy in a speech to Congress that aligned himself with the president's Republican foes. Obama responded in the Oval Office, declaring in a frustrated tone that Netanyahu offered “nothing new.”

In its response, the Iranian government denounced Netanyahu's 39-minute speech as “boring and repetitive,” the state news agency IRNA said.

“If the deal now being negotiated is accepted by Iran, that deal will not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons—it will all but guarantee that Iran will get those nuclear weapons, lots of them,” the Israeli leader said, offering a point-by-point critique of Obama's strategy.

In an appearance boycotted by dozens of Obama's fellow Democrats, Netanyahu said Iran's leadership was “as radical as ever,” could not be trusted, and the deal being worked out with world powers would not block Iran's way to a bomb “but paves its way to a bomb.”

“This deal won't be a farewell to arms, it will be a farewell to arms control ... a countdown to a potential nuclear nightmare,” Netanyahu told lawmakers and visitors in the House of Representatives. His speech drew 26 standing ovations.

Netanyahu both inveighed against the emerging terms of a deal and suggested broadening the scope of negotiations to require a change to Iran's regional posture—an idea swiftly rejected by the Obama administration as de facto “regime change” in Tehran. But Netanyahu also avoided any call for new U.S. sanctions now or for a total rollback of Iranian nuclear technologies—a signal that Israel might be able to resign itself to less.

In a 10-minute rebuttal to Netanyahu's address, Obama said the prime minister offered no viable alternatives. “The alternative that the prime minister offers is no deal,” he said.

Netanyahu's speech culminated a diplomatic storm triggered by his acceptance in January of a Republican invitation that bypassed the White House. Many Democrats considered it an affront to the president.

Obama refused to meet Netanyahu, saying that doing so just ahead of Israel's March 17 general election would be seen as interference. The president, who has a history of testy encounters with Netanyahu, said he did not watch the speech, which was broadcast live on U.S. television. He said he did read the transcript.

Underscoring the partisan divide over Netanyahu's address, House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi said afterwards that as a friend of Israel, she was near tears during his speech. She called the speech “an insult to the intelligence of the United States” and said she was “saddened by the condescension toward our knowledge of the threat posed by Iran.”

As many as 60 of the 232 Democratic members of Congress sat out the address.

Netanyahu entered the chamber to a cacophony of cheers and applause, shaking hands with dozens of lawmakers, including House Speaker John Boehner, before taking a podium and telling

lawmakers he was deeply humbled.

At the start of the speech, he sought to defuse the intense politicization of his appearance, which has hardened divisions between Republicans and Democrats over the White House approach to stopping Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Netanyahu said he was grateful to Obama for his public and private support of Israel, including U.S. military assistance and contributions to Israel's Iron Dome anti-missile system.

"I regret that some see my appearance here as political," he said. "I know that no matter which side of the aisle you sit on, you stand with Israel."

Although given the cold shoulder by the U.S. administration, Netanyahu on Monday offered an olive branch, saying he meant no disrespect to Obama by accepting an invitation orchestrated by the Republicans.

Charisma's Jennifer LeClaire is calling for urgent intercession over Netanyahu.

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