



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 7, 2015

Biden, Other Dems, to Skip Netanyahu Speech to Congress

Vice President Joe Biden is expected to be safely out of the country, traveling to a yet undisclosed overseas location when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (shown) addresses a joint session of Congress on March 3, according to information released from the vice president's office Friday. There was no word on just where the vice president is expected to be that day, other than not in the United States and certainly not in Washington, D.C. An undetermined number of congressional Democrats are also expected to skip the speech, though House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has cautioned against using what might be called "the 'B' word."



"I don't think anybody should use the word 'boycott,'" Pelosi said in her weekly press conference Thursday. It's just that Democrats may be too busy to attend. "When these heads of state come, people are here doing their work, they're trying to pass legislation, they're meeting with their constituents and the rest. It's not a high-priority item for them," Pelosi said.

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It's no secret that President Obama and his fellow Democrats are more than a little miffed over the fact that neither Speaker John Boehner nor the Israelis consulted with the White House about Boehner's invitation to the prime minister to address Congress, considered a serious breach of protocol in Washington. It also comes at a time when Obama and the Republicans are at odds over U.S. policy toward Iran, with Republicans, and some Democrats, calling for new and tougher sanctions. Obama has promised to veto any new sanctions legislation while Washington and Tehran are involved in negotiations toward ending an impasse over Iran's nuclear program. The speech by Netanyahu, who regards the potential development of Iranian nuclear weapons as an "existential threat" to Israel, is expected to put added pressure on Obama on the sanctions issue, while enabling Republicans to present themselves as the stronger friend of Israel in the 2016 elections.

"It was an insult to the president, to the State Department, what the speaker did, by not consulting the State Department and not consulting the White House," said Rep. John Lewis, a Georgia Democrat who has already announced his decision to miss the Netanyahu speech. Neither Obama, whose relationship with the Israeli prime minister has often been strained, nor Secretary of State John Kerry will meet with Netanyahu during his visit to Washington, which will come just two weeks before the March 17 election in Israel. Polls show Netanyahu in a dead heat with Isaac Herzog, leader of the center-left Labor Party. Michael Oren, Netanyahu's former ambassador to the United States, is among those in Israel who have called on Netanyahu to cancel the trip, while accusing the prime minister of making support for Israel a partisan issue in Washington.

"As a matter of long-standing practice and principle, we do not see heads of state or candidates in close



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proximity to their elections, so as to avoid the appearance of influencing a democratic election in a foreign country," [National Security Council](#) spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said in the January 22 announcement that the president would not be meeting with his Israeli counterpart.

The vice president, who is also president of the Senate, is nearly always present at a joint session of Congress, whether for the president's State of the Union address or a speech by a foreign leader. But it would be awkward for Obama to have his vice president sitting behind Netanyahu while the Israeli prime minister will likely be urging Congress and the American people to support actions toward Iran that run counter to the president's policy.

"For the Speaker to invite a head of state, of any country, to address the U.S. Congress without the consent of the [House] minority leader and the White House goes beyond the traditions of his office," Rep. G.K. Butterfield (D-N.C.) said in a written statement. Butterfield also plans to be among the missing when Netanyahu addresses the Congress. "The United States," he said, "is and will remain Israel's strongest ally. However, I refuse to be a part of a political stunt aimed at undercutting President Obama."

Boehner, meanwhile, continued to defend the invitation, telling reporters, "It was a very good idea."

"There's a message that the American people need to hear and I think [Netanyahu is] the perfect person to deliver it," Boehner said. "The threat of radical Islamist terrorists is a real threat. The threat of Iran to the region and the rest of the world is a real threat. And I believe that the American people are interested in hearing the truth about what's happening in that part of the world."

Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer and Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein were on Capitol Hill Wednesday trying to calm a rising revolt that had dozens of Democrats threatening a boycott, Politico [reported](#). During a meeting of the Israelis with seven Jewish Democratic members in the office of Rep. Steve Israel of New York, Democrats reportedly lit into Dermer for his part in arranging the Netanyahu address and putting members in the awkward position of having to choose between Netanyahu and Obama.

"There were a wide range of views that were discussed," Israel told Politico after the meeting, "but one thing we all agreed on emphatically is that Israel should never be used as a political football."

The real "football" in all of this might be Iran, with congressional hawks and Netanyahu hoping to torpedo the U.S.-Iran negotiations and bring about a heightened confrontation with Tehran over its alleged nuclear weapons program. Warnings of Iran being on the verge of producing a nuclear bomb have been sounded for the past 36 years or more and are heard so often in recent times that the claim seems to be taken for granted. That makes it easy to forget that all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies have twice — in 2007 and again in 2011 — reported that there was no evidence that Iran's nuclear program was aimed at weapons production.

Will the United States again go to war, or even to the brink of war, in the Middle East over "weapons of mass destruction" that may not even exist? Ronald Reagan used to say the problem with liberals is not that they are ignorant. "On the contrary," he would say, "they know so much that isn't so."

But liberals aren't the only ones

Photo of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: AP Images



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