

Bibigate – The Contretemps over Netanyahu’s Speech to Congress on Iran’s Nuclear Program



US House Speaker John Boehner and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu

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Last Saturday night a retired US Navy officer said “I’ll bet you even money that Bibi will withdraw from the proposed speech before a joint session of Congress”. I joshed him and said “I wouldn’t count on it.”

Sunday, I received suggestions that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu should have a Plan B given the rising contretemps in the media over US House Speaker John Boehner’s [invitation](#) to talk about Iran before a Joint Session of Congress. There was a welter of criticism from the White House, Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and mainstream media talking heads included [David Brooks](#) of the *New York Times* and [Chris Wallace and Shepherd Smith](#) of *FoxNews*. They were admonishing Speaker Boehner and Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer with terms like “dicey, wicked more for photo op” and “partisan politics” and “unwise for Israel.” It was ostensibly about the lack of courtesy shown the President by not giving prior notice to the White House of the invitation extended to Netanyahu. There was [pique](#) by certain unnamed senior officials in the White House over what some might call Bibigate.

However, let us remember there was increasing bi-partisan support for new Iran nuclear sanctions legislation despite

the President's warning that he would veto it if it was passed. New Jersey Democratic Senator Bob Menendez was particularly incensed at the President for his questioning his motivations. Menendez [said](#): "The more I hear from the administration and its quotes, the more it sounds like talking points that come straight out of Tehran. And it feeds to the Iranian narrative of victimization, when they are the ones with the original sin." Lest, we forget, the President had threatened a veto if increased Iran legislation passed. It was abundantly clear in the January 16th Joint Press Conference at the White House when the President Obama agreed with UK PM David Cameron's remarks, urging Senators on Capitol Hill not to take up new sanctions legislation at a "sensitive time". Thus, one could speculate that Speaker Boehner's invitation to Netanyahu on January 21st to speak to a Joint Session of Congress in early March was a rebuttal to the President.

The rancor over Bibigate was visible in the final week of January into February. Wednesday, January 28th, *CNN* [released](#) a clip of Fareed Zakaria's February 1st *GPS* interview with President Obama. Obama suggested that a visit with Netanyahu was "inappropriate," as it was too close to the upcoming March Knesset elections. The President said, "I'm declining to meet with him simply because our general policy is, we don't meet with any world leader two weeks before their election, [I] think that's inappropriate. And that's true with some of our closest allies." Those comments engendered another rebuttal that the White House may have been giving tacit support to the involvement of Presidential Campaign aide [Jim Byrd](#) in advising the Labor-Hanuat opposition to Netanyahu in the Knesset general elections.

Friday, January 30th, Jeffrey Goldberg published an interview in [The Atlantic](#) with Israeli Ambassador to Washington, Ron Dermer, a former US Republican strategist and member of the

Netanyahu's inner circle. Dermer discussed the background for Boehner's issuance of the invitation to Netanyahu to speak to Congress on Iran. Dermer suggested that while the Prime Minister "meant no disrespect towards President Obama ... Netanyahu must speak up while there is still time to speak up".

That led Cornell Law Professor William Jacobson on the blog *Legal Insurrection* to opine that [Obama's not offended; he just wants Bibi out of office](#).

The Hill round up on the Sunday Talk shows had comments from Rep. Paul Ryan on *NBC's* "Meet the Press" and Arizona Senator John McCain on *CNN's* "State of The Union." Over the issue of Speaker Boehner's invitation to Netanyahu Ryan [said](#)," The Invitation to Israeli prime minister was 'absolutely' appropriate. I don't know if I would say it's antagonizing". McCain [drew attention](#) to the new low in US Israel relations under Obama saying, "It's the worst that I've ever seen in my lifetime."

Virtually out of nowhere, Sunday, February 1st, commentary from an ["Insight" blog post](#) of the Israeli Institute for National Security Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University shed light on a bizarre theory of what was behind Bibigate. The author of the INSS post, [Zaki Shalom](#), suggested:

The backdrop for the Administration's expressed dissatisfaction with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's intention to present his position on negotiations with Iran to Congress, creating a rather transparent linkage between Israel's positions on negotiations with Iran and sanctions, and U.S. willingness to assist in combating the Palestinian attempt to exert international legal and diplomatic pressure on Israel.

On Thursday, January 30, 2015, the Senate Banking Committee voted out a 'softer' version of the Kirk –Menendez Sanctions

legislation by a vote of 18 to 4, including six Democrats. As [reported](#) by *The Hill*, the legislation:

... Would impose sanctions on Iran if a comprehensive agreement to roll back its nuclear program is not reached by June 30 and would allow the president to waive sanctions indefinitely for 30 days at a time.

However, the bill would be shelved until March 24th for a possible floor vote. Senator Bob Corker (R-TN) said, "All of us understand it's not going to be voted on before March 24". While the measure may portend a possible override vote should President Obama veto it that still requires Senator Menendez to keep the group of 17 Democratic Senators who support this version of sanctions legislation in the bi-partisan alliance.

Israeli concern over a weak final agreement by March 24th is reflected in a *Times of Israel* report published Sunday, February 1st,"