

President Obama Says Israeli PM Netanyahu Speech to Congress could



German Chancellor Andrea Merkel and President Obama

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Source: Getty Images

President Obama and German Chancellor Andrea Merkel held a Joint White House Press Conference today. The bulk of their remarks concerned the questions on Ukraine, Russia, the EU and NATO. One question posed by Christi Powers, Washington correspondent for *The Los Angeles Times* (*L.A. Times*), dealt with alleged Administration “outrage” over Israeli PM Netanyahu’s acceptance of an invitation to address a Joint Session of Congress in Early March. The President objected to Netanyahu’s appearance because it allegedly violates diplomatic protocols that the President doesn’t meet with foreign leaders in the midst of their domestic political campaigns. The President further suggested the Prime Minister’s speech to a Joint Session of Congress would “sour negotiations” for a final nuclear agreement with Iran. Even before today’s news conference there have been questions raised about White House objections to Netanyahu’s appearance before Congress. Further, there are questions as to whether the leaked terms of an agreement regarding nuclear enrichment would prevent Iran from achieving nuclear breakout.

[Watch](#) this C-Span video clip of President Obama’s responses to this question posed by Ms. Powers of the *L.A. Times*:

Note this excerpt from the White House Joint Press Conference

Transcript: Christi Parsons, White House correspondent, *L.A. Times*

Q Thank you, Mr. President. [...] Sir, some have suggested that you are outraged by the Israeli Prime Minister's decision to address Congress. Is that so? And how would you advise Democrats who are considering a boycott?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: With respect to Prime Minister Netanyahu, as I've said before, I talk to him all the time, our teams constantly coordinate. We have a practice of not meeting with leaders right before their elections, two weeks before their elections. As much as I love Angela, if she was two weeks away from an election she probably would not have received an invitation to the White House – (laughter) – and I suspect she wouldn't have asked for one. (Laughter.) And I think it's important for us to maintain these protocols – because the U.S.-Israeli relationship is not about a particular party. This isn't a relationship founded on affinity between the Labor Party and the Democratic Party, or Likud and the Republican Party. This is the U.S.-Israeli relationship that extends beyond parties, and has to do with that unbreakable bond that we feel and our commitment to Israel's security, and the shared values that we have. And the way to preserve that is to make sure that it doesn't get clouded with what could be perceived as partisan politics. Whether that's accurate or not, that is a potential perception, and that's something that we have to guard against. Now, I don't want to be coy. The Prime Minister and I have a very real difference around Iran, Iran sanctions. I have been very clear ... that it does not make sense to sour the negotiations a month or two before they're about to be completed. ... If, in fact, we can get a deal, then we should embrace that. If we can't get a deal, then we'll have to make a set of decisions, and, as I've said to Congress, I'll be the first one to work with them to apply even stronger measures against Iran. As the

President of the United States, I'm looking at what the options are if we don't get a diplomatic resolution. And those options are narrow and ... not attractive. And from the perspective of U.S. interests – and I believe from the perspective of Israel's interests, although I can't speak for, obviously, the Israeli government – it is far better if we can get a diplomatic solution. So there are real differences substantively, but that's separate and apart from the whole issue of Mr. Netanyahu coming to Washington.

Late today, the Iran Task Force organized by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and The Council of Foreign Relations, reported technical findings that raised basic questions about whether the pending P5+1 final agreement would deter nuclear breakout. It cited former IAEA Deputy Director Dr. Olli Heinonen:

That with 9,500 centrifuges and a stock of nuclear material, Iran would have a breakout time of “no more than six months.” This is far less than the one-year breakout time that the administration has stated it is seeking. In effect, it would represent recognition of Iran as a nuclear threshold state—a status FDD believes would be dangerous to U.S. national security.

But there are others who would disagree with the President on what was behind the swirl of news stories on Netanyahu's speech controversy.

Prior to today's Joint White House Press Conference with President Obama and Chancellor Merkel, there was a *Washington Post* commentary on Sunday by David Bernstein with the provocative question, [“Did the Obama Administration lie about Netanyahu?”](#) Bernstein wrote:

The notification issue that the White House has focused on is a bit of a red herring. The White House knew about the invitation before Netanyahu accepted it, and it hardly

seems worthy of a major diplomatic incident that the Israelis relied on Boehner to convey the fact of the invitation. The problem, instead, seems to be that the Administration (a) believes that Boehner and Netanyahu's representatives in D.C. plotted the invitation behind the White House's back; (b) Netanyahu didn't give the White House a chance to consider whether it wanted to veto the invitation before it was made public; (c) all against a backdrop of profound mistrust, or perhaps hostility, on the part of Obama toward Netanyahu. (Let's recall that, speaking of diplomatic protocol, [this president](#) and his [top advisors](#) have not always extended diplomatic niceties to Netanyahu). Was the White House really blindsided by all this (is it really possible that no one in the Administration had an inkling that an invitation to Netanyahu was in the works?) Or did the Administration take the opportunity to try to drive a wedge between Netanyahu and Congressional Democrats, and to try to make Netanyahu look bad before upcoming Israeli elections?