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WHITE HOUSE

Biden to miss Netanyahu address to Congress

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Feb. 1, 2015: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is shown at a meeting in Jerusalem. (AP)

Vice President Biden is expected to miss Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to a joint meeting of Congress -- apparently because of overseas travel -- as several Democratic lawmakers plan to sit out the address in protest.

A White House official confirmed to Fox News on Friday that the vice president will miss the address, as he will be traveling abroad.

As president of the Senate, Biden would typically attend a joint meeting of Congress, putting the White House in a bind because of its irritation about Netanyahu's visit. The White House has accused Netanyahu and congressional Republicans of breaching diplomatic protocol by arranging the address without coordinating with the administration.

Biden's overseas trip allows the White House to avoid the awkwardness of having the vice president sit behind Netanyahu during the address. It's unclear where the vice president plans to travel, though his office said the unspecified trip was in the works before the prime minister's trip was announced.

Netanyahu is scheduled to address Congress on March 3.

Meanwhile, at least three prominent Democratic lawmakers have vowed to boycott the speech, saying they disapprove of House Speaker John Boehner's decision to invite the Israeli leader without consulting President Obama. Reps. John Lewis

of Georgia, G.K. Butterfield of North Carolina and Earl Blumenauer of Oregon announced their decisions earlier this week.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said the president believes individual members of Congress should make their own decisions about whether or not to attend.

This week, officials began laying the groundwork for the prospect that Biden would skip the speech, noting that he also missed a joint meeting of Congress in 2011 because of foreign travel.

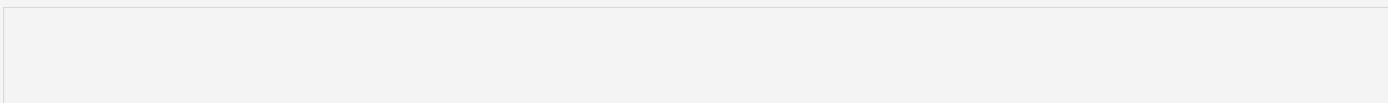
Earnest, still, stressed that the vice president "takes very seriously the ceremonial responsibilities that he has before the United States Senate."

The White House already had confirmed that Obama will not meet with his Israeli counterpart, so as not to appear to be influencing or taking sides in the looming Israeli election.

Obama and Netanyahu have long had a tense relationship, in part because of the Israeli leader's skepticism of the U.S.-led nuclear negotiations with Iran. Netanyahu has backed congressional efforts to pass new sanctions on Iran during the negotiations, again putting him at odds with Obama, who has vowed to veto such legislation.

Boehner has asked Netanyahu to speak about the Iran issue when he addresses Congress.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.



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