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White House tries to ease flare-up over Netanyahu insults

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The White House on Wednesday sought to tamp down the controversy over a magazine piece that detailed deep tensions between the U.S. and Israel – and quoted an unnamed senior Obama administration official calling the Israeli leader a “chickenshit.”

Administration officials, including White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest, did not deny the quote. They also did not signal there would be any robust effort to find out who said it.

But Alistair Baskey, spokesman for the National Security Council, said the criticism does not reflect how the rest of the administration views Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“Certainly that’s not the administration’s view, and we think such comments are inappropriate and counter-productive,” Baskey said in a statement. “Prime Minister Netanyahu and the president have forged an effective partnership, and consult closely and frequently, including earlier this month when the president hosted the prime minister in the Oval Office.”

At the same time, Baskey acknowledged they “do not agree on every issue,” including on settlement activity that the U.S. considers “illegitimate.”

Officials quoted in The Atlantic magazine article, written by Jeffrey Goldberg, were far more blunt in their characterization of those differences. Goldberg quoted one anonymous senior administration official saying: “The thing about Bibi is, he’s a chickenshit.”

The article said Obama administration officials have also described Netanyahu over the years “as recalcitrant, myopic, reactionary, obtuse, blustering, pompous, and ‘Aspergery.’”

The comments prompted criticism among Republican and Jewish leaders.

Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus on Tuesday accused the administration of “hurling expletives” at the Israeli leader.

House Speaker John Boehner also condemned the “disrespectful rhetoric used time and again by this administration with respect to the special relationship the United States has with the state of Israel.”

He added: “The president sets the tone for his administration. He either condones the profanity and disrespect used by the most senior members of his administration, or he does not. It is time for him to get his house in order and tell the people that can’t muster professionalism that it is time to move on.”

That statement led to a pointed rebuke from Earnest, who said Boehner himself is known for using “salty” language.

“It’s a little rich to have a lecture about profanity from the speaker of the House,” Earnest said, while also saying the reported comments do not reflect the administration’s views. Earnest said he’d be “surprised” if Obama knows who made them.

State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry and others “don’t view” the language used in the article as “appropriate or accurate.”

Dan Gillerman, former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, told Fox News that if the quotes are accurate, “I think it’s shameful.”

“This is not the way you speak about your only ally, about the only democracy in the Middle East, especially not when the Middle East is so volatile,” he said Wednesday.

The Atlantic piece described a relationship that has steadily gone south over the years, and that it claimed is moving toward a “full-blown crisis” – which could get worse after the midterm elections next week. A possible nuclear agreement with Iran is a major factor that could cause more friction.


Goldberg, in his piece, laid plenty of blame on Netanyahu, and reported that sources say he’s likewise “written off” the Obama administration. He noted that the U.S. is angry with him for his settlement stance in the West Bank.

One official also told The Atlantic they don’t think Netanyahu would launch a preemptive strike on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure.

“The good thing about Netanyahu is that he’s scared to launch wars,” another official was quoted as saying. The official reportedly criticized him, though, for doing little to reach an accord with the Palestinians and allegedly being more interested in political preservation.

In the wake of the article, Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, called for President Obama to “name, apologize for, and repudiate” the person who offered the “chickenshit” insult, according to The Algemeiner.

“It is rather ironic that a senior American official is prepared to curse his friends, yet when it comes to the mortal enemies of the United States -- as the Iranians discovered during the recent nuclear negotiation -- praise is heaped on them,” Hier said.

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