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Obama Won't Meet With Netanyahu During Washington Visit

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White House blames upcoming elections in Israel

President Obama will not meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu next month when he is in Washington to address a joint session of Congress, the White House said Thursday.

“As a matter of long-standing practice and principle, we do not see heads of state or candidates in close proximity to their elections, so as to avoid the appearance of influencing a democratic election in a foreign country,” National Security Council Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan said in a statement. “Accordingly, the President will not be meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu because of the proximity to the Israeli election, which is just two weeks after his planned address to the U.S. Congress.”



US President Barack Obama(R) and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hold a meeting in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington on March 3, 2014.

Saul Loeb—AFP/Getty Images

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On Wednesday, Speaker of the House John Boehner announced that Netanyahu had accepted an invitation to address Congress on Feb. 11, but neither the Republican leader nor the Israelis informed the White House, in a move Press Secretary Josh Earnest called a breach from protocol. The personal relationship between the U.S. and Israeli leader has deteriorated in recent years, even as both leaders argue that the professional relationship has never been stronger.

“The typical protocol would suggest that the leader of a country would contact the leader of another country when he’s traveling there,” he said. “That certainly is how President Obama’s trips are planned when we travel overseas. So this particular event seems to be a departure from that protocol.”

His address comes as congressional Republicans are pressuring Obama over the ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran. During his State of the Union Address this week, Obama threatened to veto any additional sanctions legislation passed by the GOP-controlled Congress while talks are ongoing.

“The President has been clear about his opposition to Congress passing new legislation on Iran that could undermine our negotiations and divide the international community,” Meehan said. “The President has had many conversations with the Prime Minister on this matter, and I am sure they will continue to be in contact on this and other important matters.”

In a statement announcing the address, Boehner called Netanyahu “a great friend of our country.” “In this time of challenge, I am asking the Prime Minister to address Congress on the grave threats radical Islam and Iran pose to our security and way of life,” he said. “Americans and Israelis have always stood together in shared cause and common ideals, and now we must rise to the moment again.”

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