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## **Prime Minister Netanyahu in the US Congress:**

### **Did the Ends Justify the Means?**

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The 40-minute speech Prime Minister Netanyahu delivered to a joint session of the US Congress on March 3, 2015 may be remembered more for its impact on US-Israel relations than for its intended objective, i.e., influence on the agreement negotiated by the P5+1 and Iran on Iran's nuclear program.

In recent months Prime Minister Netanyahu became even more critical of what he has viewed as a conciliatory approach toward Iran and what he has described as the "bad agreement" emerging from the negotiations. His efforts to toughen the demands from Iran have failed, regarding both the nuclear issue and terror activities, and he may have looked to the US Congress as the last unturned stone before a deal with Iran is concluded. Yet even before his invitation to address the US Congress, it was clear that President Obama would not sign any legislation imposing more sanctions on Iran before negotiations ended. Thus while the Prime Minister's concern on an emerging deal is entirely legitimate, his willingness nonetheless to turn to Congress, disregarding the President's clear signals, incensed the President, his National Security advisor, and the Secretary of State, who all expressed dismay and anger. To his credit, the President at least publically was circumspect in trying to minimize the impact of the approach to Congress on the relations (as evident, for example, in his interview with Reuters on March 2, 2015).

The row between Prime Minister Netanyahu and the White House apparently did not affect Netanyahu's approval rate among US public opinion, which in a Gallup poll stood at 45 percent, equal to previous polls. Congress, however, was a different story, where the Prime Minister ranked decisively lower among Democrats than before, as evidenced by the unprecedented absence from the joint session of more than 50 Democratic Representatives and Senators. Netanyahu was clearly aware of this tension and devoted several minutes early in his speech to praise of President Obama's support for Israel's security and to the support for Israel among the entire Congress. From where he spoke Prime Minister Netanyahu may have missed some of the US lawmakers who remained seated when their colleagues responded with a standing ovation to his declaration that no

deal with Iran is better than the deal that is now on the table. It is clear that at least for now the disagreement on Iran's nuclear program between Israel and the US has become another partisan issue in the political contest between the Republican-controlled Congress and the Democratic President, much against Israel's traditional desire to maintain bi-partisan, wall-to-wall support.

Concern for further damaged relations with Obama may have prompted Netanyahu to praise Obama's concern for Israel's security instead of accusing him outright of endangering Israel's existence by making concessions to Iran. Likewise, Netanyahu stopped short of asking Congress to legislate new sanctions or prevent the President from lifting sanctions before Congress approved such action (a draft bill to that extent was proposed by several Democratic and Republican senators on February 27, 2015). He may have convinced them that the one year to a nuclear breakout by Iran, or that the 10-year sunset provision are too short (to quote, for example, Senator Dianne Feinstein, the ranking Democrat on the Intelligence Committee in remarks to CNN following the speech), but it is very doubtful whether that will lead them to oppose the deal if reached and brought to a vote.

In his initial reaction to the speech on Fox News, President Obama expressed what many of the Senators and Congressmen may have felt, namely, that Netanyahu is right about the dangers and threats that Iran poses to Israel, other countries in the region, and US interests, but that essentially he did not offer what the President called "a viable alternative."

The assertion by Netanyahu that even if left alone Israel will know how to deal with Iran may have sounded to much of his audience in Congress as a threat to foil the agreement, either before or after an agreement is reached. Be that as it may, Congress, even if convinced by the Israeli Prime Minister about the dangers that a "bad agreement" will create for Israel, has very little influence at this stage of the negotiations with Iran. For his part, the President made it clear that though he shares some of these concerns he is not about to change gear.

Thus it is questionable whether the marginal effect that the Netanyahu speech may have on the current course of the negotiations with Iran justified the row, tension, and latest cracks in the personal relations between Obama and Netanyahu, as well as the danger of Israel becoming a political football in the US partisan rivalry between the Democratic and Republican Parties. To be sure, the Netanyahu Congressional speech affair is not yet over. There might be renewed attempts to legislate new laws that aim to limit the administration's ability to conclude an agreement; a refusal by Congress to lift sanctions, even if partially, if an agreement with Iran is reached; and a continuous debate if the negotiations end with no agreement. In either case a dialogue between the governments

of Israel and the US will be necessary, and it is hoped that the strident exchanges of recent weeks will not prevent that from taking place.

