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Former US secretary: Netanyahu speech ‘poisoning’ ties

Robert Reich, who headed Department of Labor under Clinton, says Tuesday’s Congress address pitting Jews against Israel

By [Stuart Winer](#) March 1, 2015, 8:43 am [95](#)

Former US labor secretary Robert Reich offered sharp criticism of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Saturday, saying that the premier’s intention to address Congress on Tuesday, against the wishes of the White House, was driving many US Jews to speak out against Israel when in the past they may have remained silent. He also said that the speech was “poisoning the relationship” between Israel and the US.

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In a [post to his Facebook page](#), Reich, who was secretary during the Clinton administration from 1993 to 1997, appealed not to Netanyahu but rather to the people of Israel, and warned them that the prime minister was meddling in internal US politics.

“You should know that the new-found alliance between your prime minister and our Republican Party, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and some wealthy right-wing Jews here (such as billionaire Sheldon Adelson), is poisoning the relationship between Israel and the United States,” wrote Reich, who is Jewish.

“Netanyahu’s decision to address Congress on Tuesday to argue against a nuclear deal with Iran that’s one of the president’s highest priorities, and also to speak to AIPAC – just two weeks before your own national elections – foists your own domestic politics onto ours,” he wrote.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu prays at the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem on February 28, 2015 (Photo credit: AFP/Pool/Marc Sellem)

Reich said that the speech, which is scheduled for Tuesday, was driving Americans, among them many in the Jewish community, to turn against Israel. Netanyahu is expected to try to sway Congress against President Barack Obama’s push to seal an agreement on Iran’s nuclear program.

“It is having a polarizing effect here in the United States, pushing many Americans to side against Israel, and thereby posing a long-term threat to Israel’s security,” he said. “Meanwhile, many American Jews who have refrained from speaking out against the right-wing radicalism that has taken hold in Israel – a radicalism that rejects a ‘two-state solution’ and continues to build new settlements on the West Bank, and which we believe imperils the future of Israel — are now feeling emboldened to do so.”

Netanyahu accepted an invitation to speak to Congress from Republican House Speaker John Boehner, who bypassed the White House in extending the invitation.

The upcoming speech is openly opposed by the Obama administration, Democratic legislators — some of whom have said they will not attend — and many within the US Jewish community. American lawmakers charged that the invitation to address Congress disregarded diplomatic protocol and was an attempt by Netanyahu to derail the US-brokered nuclear negotiations with Iran, Obama’s signature foreign policy objective.

AIPAC has declared its support for the event and spokesman Marshall Wittmann told The Times of Israel that the organization has been lobbying members of Congress to attend the event.

“AIPAC does not speak for us,” Reich countered. “House Republicans do not speak for us. Billionaires do not speak for us. We have been silent for too long.”

Last week, [US National Security Adviser Susan Rice](#) said in an interview that the manner in which Netanyahu’s speech was arranged and his insistence in going ahead with it had become a partisan issue that was “destructive of the fabric of the relationship” between Israel and the US.

Netanyahu’s speech is controversial because it puts Israel on a collision course with the Obama administration as it negotiates with Iran over its nuclear program — talks that in their current form could lead to a deal that potentially poses an existential risk to Israel, Netanyahu has warned. Thus, he intends to

argue before Congress that the international community should increase its pressure on Iran, rather than ease sanctions against it under the reported terms of the emerging nuclear deal.

The speech is also set just two weeks before the prime minister faces elections back home, a fact that critics in Israel and the US have seized on to accuse Netanyahu of seeking to drum up support for his Likud party.

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