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Barack Obama

On Iran and PM Netanyahu's Speech to Congress

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Well, this is going to be the first opportunity that I have to get an extensive debriefing from Secretary Carter, who took a trip last week to Afghanistan and other parts of the region. He'll be giving me some impressions about how we're planning our drawdown and transition in Afghanistan, and talk about some other regional issues.

One issue that we will be discussing is Iran. And obviously that's been a topic of great interest today, so let me just make a couple comments on that. I did not have a chance to watch Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech -- I was on a video conference with our European partners with respect to Ukraine. I did have a chance to take a look at the transcript and as far as I can tell, there was nothing new.

The Prime Minister appropriately pointed out that the bond between the United States of America is unbreakable, and on that point I thoroughly agree. He also pointed out that Iran has been a dangerous regime and continues to engage in activities that are contrary to the interests of the United States, to Israel, and to the region. And on that, we agree. He also pointed out the fact that Iran has repeatedly threatened Israel and engaged in the most venomous of anti-Semitic statements. And no one can dispute that.



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But on the core issue, which is how do we prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, which would make it far more dangerous and would give it scope for even greater action in the region, the Prime Minister didn't offer any viable alternatives. So let's be clear about what exactly the central concern should be, both for the United States and for Israel.

I've said since before I became President that one of my primary goals in foreign policy would be preventing Iran from getting nuclear weapons. And with the help of Congress and our international partners, we constructed an extraordinarily effective sanctions regime that pressured Iran to come to the table to negotiate in a serious fashion. They have now been negotiating over the last year, and during that period, Iran has, in fact, frozen its program, rolled back some of its most dangerous highly enriched uranium, and subjected itself to the kinds of verifications and inspections that we had not previously seen.

Keep in mind that when we shaped that interim deal, Prime Minister Netanyahu made almost the precise same speech about how dangerous that deal was going to be. And yet, over a year later, even Israeli intelligence officers and, in some cases, members of the Israeli government, have to acknowledge that, in fact, it has kept Iran from further pursuing its nuclear program.

Now, the deal that we are trying to negotiate that is not yet completed would cut off the different pathways for Iran to advance its nuclear capabilities. It would roll back some elements of its program. It would ensure that it did not have what we call a breakout capacity that was shorter than a year's time. And it would subject Iran to the most vigorous inspections and verifications regimes that have ever been put in place.

And the alternative that the Prime Minister offers is no deal, in which case Iran will immediately begin once again pursuing its nuclear program, accelerate its nuclear program, without us having any insight into what they're doing, and without constraint. And his essential argument is that if we just double down on sanctions, Iran won't want to do that.

Well, we have evidence from the past decade that sanctions alone are not sufficient to prevent Iran from pursuing its nuclear ambitions. And if it, in fact, does not have some sense that sanctions will be removed, it will not have an interest in avoiding the path that it's currently on.

So the bottom line is this: We don't yet have a deal.

It may be that Iran cannot say yes to a good deal. I have repeatedly said that I would rather have no deal than a bad deal. But if we're successful in negotiating, then, in fact, this will be the best deal possible to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Nothing else comes close. Sanctions won't do it. Even military action would not be as successful as the deal that we have put forward.



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And I think it is very important not to be distracted by the nature of the Iranian regime's ambitions when it comes to territory or terrorism -- all issues which we share a concern with Israel about and are working consistently with Israel on. Because we know that if, in fact, they obtain a nuclear weapon, all those problems would be worse.

So we're staying focused on the central issue here: How do we prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. The path that we've proposed, if successful, by far is the best way to do that. That's demonstrable. And Prime Minister Netanyahu has not offered any kind of viable alternative that would achieve the same verifiable mechanism to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.

So I would urge the members of Congress who were there to continue to express their strong support for Israel's security, to continue to express their strong interest in providing the assistance Israel needs to repel attacks. I think it's important for members of Congress, on a bipartisan basis, to be unified in pushing back against terrorism in the region and the destabilizing efforts that Iran may have engaged in with our partners. Those are all things in which this administration and Israel agree.

But when it comes to this nuclear deal, let's wait until there's actually a deal on the table that Iran has agreed to, at which point everybody can evaluate it; we don't have to speculate. And what I can guarantee is that if it's a deal I've signed off on, I will be able to prove that it is the best way for us to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.

And for us to pass up on that potential opportunity would be a great mistake. It's not one that I intend to make, and I will take that case to every member of Congress once we actually have a deal.

I'll take one question from Julie. Go ahead.

Question: Now that you've had a chance to read the Prime Minister's remarks at least, do you feel like the speech he gave was appropriate, considering his upcoming elections and the upcoming deadline? And you also talked to other foreign leaders today -- the call on Ukraine. Did Iran come up at all, and are you expecting any signs of support from them vis-à-vis your position versus the Prime Minister?

President Obama: No. All the folks on the call today share my position that we should see if we can get this deal done. It was not a topic of conversation. With respect to the decision of the Speaker to offer up the House Chamber two weeks before Mr. Netanyahu's election to make this case, I think that question should be directed to Mr. Boehner. As I said, it is very important for us not to politicize the relationship between Israel and the United States. It's very important for all of us Americans to realize that we have a system of government in which foreign policy runs through the executive branch and the President, not through other channels.



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And I think it's important for us to stay focused on the problem at hand. And the specific problem that is being debated right now is not whether we trust the Iranian regime or not -- we don't trust them. It's not whether Iran engages in destabilizing activities -- everybody agrees with that.

The central question is, how can we stop them from getting a nuclear weapon.

And what we know is that if we're able to get a deal, not only do we cut off all the various pathways for Iran getting a nuclear weapon, but we also know that we'll have a verification mechanism and an inspection mechanism where if they cheat and if they engage in a covert program we are far more likely to see it in time to do something about it.

What I also know is if we don't have a deal, as Prime Minister Netanyahu suggested -- if, in fact, he's right that they're not trustworthy, they intend to pursue a covert program, and they cheat, we'll be far less aware of it until it is potentially too late.

What I also know is, is that he made the same argument before this current interim deal, and even officials in his own government had to acknowledge that Iran has, in fact, maintained their end of the bargain.

So what I'm focused on right now is solving this problem. I'm not focused on the politics of it, I'm not focused on the theater of it. And my strong suggestion would be that members of Congress, as they evaluate it, stay similarly focused.

All right. Thank you, guys.