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## After Congress speech scandal, Netanyahu is toast at White House

As long as Obama is in office, he has no intention of meeting Netanyahu. If reelected, the Israeli PM may find himself abandoned and defenseless in the international arena.

By Barak Ravid | Jan. 30, 2015 | 2:38 AM | 32

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Yigal Palmor, until a few months ago the Foreign Ministry's spokesman, distributed before he left the job a paper titled "The Diplomatic Cliché Collection" among the ministry's staff in Israel and its missions worldwide.

The semi-humorous paper was intended to translate the euphemisms uttered by leaders, foreign ministers, diplomats and government spokespeople when they are faced with difficult questions.

The "Cliché Collection" was very useful this week in a statement U.S. President Barack Obama made on CNN about the approaching visit of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Washington. Obama said he wouldn't meet Netanyahu during his visit because such a meeting, two weeks before the Israeli elections, would be "inappropriate."

When Obama's words are translated in the spirit of the cliché collection, "inappropriate" really means "the man really gets on my nerves and I hope you get the hint." Similarly, "two weeks before the elections" means "even two weeks after the elections I won't want to see Netanyahu, but now I've got a great excuse."

Last week, a few hours after it transpired that Netanyahu organized himself a speech in Congress, Obama's advisers sat in the White House and tried to think of a fitting presidential response to the move made behind their backs. The general feeling was of astonishment mingled with insult and anger.

Senior Israeli and American officials say the White House is seething with anger against Netanyahu. Following the trick he concocted with Republican leaders in Congress, Netanyahu is said to be "toast" as far as Obama is concerned. An Israeli official said the strong words he heard American officials use against Netanyahu convinced him that even if Netanyahu is elected on March 17 for another term, Obama wouldn't meet him before he leaves the White House in a little less than two years.

Another man to whom Netanyahu is "toast," at least temporarily, is Secretary of State John Kerry. In the last two years Kerry was the main defender of Netanyahu's government in the world and Netanyahu hastened to call him for help every time he was entangled by his government's policy.

When the European Union advanced sanctions against the settlements, Kerry tried to block them; when Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas went to the UN Security Council, Kerry pressured state leaders not to support the move. When the Palestinians turned to the International Criminal Court at The Hague, Kerry made 50 phone calls, to the court's prosecutor and to foreign ministers across the globe, in an effort to block the move.

Kerry was subjected to quite a few insults from Netanyahu and his ministers, mainly for his efforts to advance the peace process with the Palestinians. Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon called him "messianic" and "obsessive," Habayit Hayehudi head Naftali Bennett said he was anti-Semitic and Likud minister Gilad Erdan said he was endangering Israel in his talks with Iran, and had no understanding of the goings on in the region.

But the more attacks the U.S. state secretary was subjected to, the harder he tried not to burn the last bridge with Netanyahu. Kerry spoke with him on the phone a few times a week and saw him almost every chance he had. However, Netanyahu's maneuver over the Congress speech was the last straw for Kerry.

He felt personally affronted. His announcement that he wouldn't meet Netanyahu in Washington was perhaps even more significant than the president's. For Obama, such a move was almost self-evident. With Kerry it reflected a real rupture. He may feel differently in a month's time, but in recent days Kerry has been telling anyone who wants to hear that Netanyahu's move will have repercussions, according to an official who spoke to him.

Until the Israeli elections, the administration does not intend to do anything. But a senior minister believes that if Netanyahu forms the next government, his life with the White House and State Department will be rough.

The Americans are not expected to cut back defense assistance to Israel, at least not at first. Obama is expected to maintain the security and intelligence coordination as if there is no Netanyahu, and keep his distance from Netanyahu as if there is no security and intelligence coordination.

This could take place when the Palestinians make another bid for statehood in an approach to the UN Security Council after the elections in Israel. An Israeli official believes that if the resolution draft is not radical and Netanyahu is still prime minister, Obama will not veto it.

At the same time, the Americans could stop their assistance to Israel in blocking the Palestinians' move to bring Israel up on war crimes charges at the International Court of Justice. They might even push the European states to increase their pressure on Israel and impose additional sanctions on West Bank and East Jerusalem settlements.

If the Congress speech affair turned Netanyahu into "toast" at the White House, it totally wiped out Israel's Ambassador to Washington Ron Dermer. That Dermer wasn't the most popular Israeli in the administration before last week's events in an understatement. But now he has turned himself into persona non grata.

White House officials think Dermer was the one who concocted the invitation of Netanyahu to Congress, together with the Republicans. They believe Dermer dragged Netanyahu into it, persuading him that it could get a majority of 67 senators to overturn any attempt of Obama's to veto legislation to impose more sanctions on Iran.

The White House conveyed a clear message to Dermer on Thursday on the front page of the New York Times. A senior American official blasted him for "cooking up" Netanyahu's invitation to Congress behind the administration's back. The official said that time and again Dermer put Netanyahu's political interests above relations between Israel and the United States.

Dermer's response to the whole affair shows that if he were to resign his post in Washington, he could feel right at home in Naftali Bennett's Habayit Hayehudi party – just like in their campaign, he too refuses to apologize. In an interview with the New York Times on Thursday, the Israeli ambassador said that he has no regrets, saying that he acted to advance Israel's interests. As for the responsibility for the awkwardness, it lies, he said, with U.S. Speaker of the House John Boehner.

"My understanding was that it was the speaker's prerogative to do, and that he would be the one to inform the administration," Dermer noted. "The prime minister feels very strongly that he has to speak on this issue (Iran's nuclear program). That's why he accepted the invitation, not to wade into your political debate or make this a partisan issue, and not to be disrespectful to the president."

The damage Dermer has done to himself and to U.S.-Israel relations is irreparable, as long as he runs the embassy in Washington. True, Dermer has not been officially declared a persona non grata by the U.S. State Department. But, as long as Obama is in office, it is difficult to imagine any senior administration official meeting with Dermer more than the minimum required by protocol.

In the past week Dermer, Netanyahu and Boehner have overcooked this dish until it's ruined. Instead of enlisting Democratic senators to support new sanctions on Iran, the Israeli-American scandal had the opposite result. Netanyahu managed to do the impossible: He helped Obama rehabilitate his relations with his party members in the House and Senate.

The 10 Democratic senators who were considering supporting the sanctions are now toeing the White House's line. The new legislation was put in the freezer until after the Israeli elections. Nancy Pelosi, minority leader of the House of Representatives, called Netanyahu and suggested reconsidering delivering the speech, and a group of congressmen started petitioning members for a letter calling on Boehner to put off his invitation to Netanyahu until April, when the prime minister may no longer be politically relevant.

As in many cases in the past, Netanyahu's attempts to confront Obama on the president's home court boomeranged. Once again Netanyahu ended up on the losing side. Having no meetings with any senior administration officials, with an agenda that has turned temporarily irrelevant, and in a situation where his trip could cause more damage than good, perhaps Netanyahu would do better to stay at home and focus on his election campaign.