Don’t Disrespect Our President, Black Lawmakers Tell Netanyahu
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2/10/15 9:27 PM EST

The audience for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s speech to Congress on March 3 is shaping up to be largely Republican — and almost completely white.

Many members of the Congressional Black Caucus say they’re planning to skip the speech, calling it a slight to President Barack Obama that they can’t and won’t support.

Israeli officials have been taken by surprise by the CBC backlash, kicked off by Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), a civil rights leader who said last week he won’t attend, quickly followed by Rep. Jim Clyburn (D-S.C.) and others. As a result, they’re working to set up a meeting for CBC members with Ambassador Ron Dermer — or even Netanyahu himself when he’s in Washington.

“To me, it is somewhat of an insult to the president of the United States,” said Rep. Greg Meeks (D-N.Y.), leaving the White House on Tuesday after a long meeting with Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, who also will miss the speech. “Barack Obama is my president. He’s the nation’s president, and it is clear, therefore, that I’m not going to be there, as a result of that, not as a result of the good people of Israel.”

Netanyahu’s speech to Congress, scheduled just two weeks before Israeli national elections, is aimed at stopping a deal with Iran over its nuclear weapons program — a diplomatic opening Obama administration officials believe could reintegrate Iran into the international community and enhance Israel’s security. Netanyahu, however, feels the United States and its international partners are being naive about Iran’s true intent.

“I’m determined to speak before Congress to stop Iran,” Netanyahu tweeted on Tuesday. Democrats across Capitol Hill have been increasingly vocal about their opposition to the speech, criticizing the prime minister and House Speaker John Boehner for making them choose between their support for their president and support for Israel. Announcements that Democrats plan to sit out the speech have trickled in for days.

But the CBC reaction has been particularly potent, striking at the political alliance between Jews and African-Americans that dates to the civil rights movement but has grown more fraught over the years.

Often Obama’s strongest defenders against political attacks, black members say they’re outraged that a foreign leader would try to intervene in the U.S. political process.

“It’s not just about disrespect for the president, it’s disrespect for the American people and our system of government for a foreign leader to insert himself into a issue that our policymakers are grappling with,” said Rep. Hank Johnson (D-Ga.). “It’s not simply about President Obama being a black man disrespected by a foreign leader. It’s deeper than that.”
CBC chairman Rep. G.K. Butterfield (D-N.C.) told reporters that the speech didn’t come up as a topic in the 90 minutes they spent with Obama in the Cabinet Room. But he, like Meeks, Johnson and many of his members, is not planning to go to Netanyahu’s speech. Butterfield said the black caucus is in “conversation” with Israeli officials to set up a meeting with either Netanyahu or the ambassador, who has met with several black members of Congress as part of his efforts to calm the furor.

“There are a number of members who aren’t going to attend, but they don’t want to make it sound like a group decision,” said Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.).

CBC members Reps. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), Keith Ellison (D-Minn.) and Donna Edwards (D-Md.) have also announced they’re skipping the speech. Fellow CBC member Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.), the CBC’s only member in the upper chamber, hasn’t ruled out attending, but he won’t commit to going either.

“I’ve been asked that a number of times — I’m not commenting,” he said before slipping out the White House gates and onto a waiting bus to take him back to the Capitol.

The spokesman for the Israeli Embassy had no comment about the breakdown with the CBC over the speech. But a spokesman for Boehner defended the speaker’s decision to invite the Israeli leader: “Prime Minister Netanyahu’s upcoming visit isn’t about Speaker Boehner, and it’s not about President Obama,” spokesman Cory Fritz said. “At this critical moment it’s important that the American people hear from Israel about the grave threats posed by Iran and Islamic radicalism.”

Though many CBC members are boycotting, for now they’ve decided not to make it an official caucus position.

“I don’t hold Netanyahu responsible,” Butterfield said. “I hold Speaker Boehner responsible, but I would hope that Mr. Netanyahu would not want to get involved. I personally think it is disrespectful.”

That was a word many members used: “It is very disrespectful to this president, and what concerns me more is that I think it’s a pattern that is starting to develop from this speaker that we’re getting more and more disrespectful of the office of the presidency,” said Rep. Cedric Richmond (D-La.). “I think it’s silly and petty.”

Asked whether CBC members see the speech as an insult, Rep. Frederica Wilson (D-Fla.) said, “I think they kind of think it is.”
Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) co-signed a letter Tuesday to Boehner with Rep. Steve Cohen (D-Tenn.), calling for the speech to be postponed.

“The timing of this invitation and lack of coordination with the White House indicate that this is not an ordinary diplomatic visit,” they wrote. “When the Israeli prime minister visits us outside the specter of partisan politics, we will be delighted and honored to greet him or her on the floor of the House.”

The idea of meeting with Dermer or Netanyahu separately doesn’t seem to be catching on with CBC members, either. Noting that Dermer once worked for Republican pollster Frank Luntz, Johnson called the ambassador a “longtime, right-wing political hack” and said he is uninterested in meeting with either him or Netanyahu.

“I don’t think I would be willing to come to such a meeting,” Johnson said. “Not at that time, and under this condition, no.”