

Israel Spied on US-Iran Talks In Effort to Block Deal

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In a lengthy article published Tuesday, the Wall Street Journal reports that Israeli intelligence services spied on the Iran nuclear talks and leaked details to congressional Republicans and Democrats in an effort to block a prospective deal.

Unnamed top White House officials served as the principal source for the article, providing descriptions of the reaction within the highest levels of the Obama administration and the US intelligence apparatus to the Israeli operation. In effect, the *Journal* article is a further blow struck in the mounting conflict between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government in Israel.

According to the newspaper's account, US officials consider Israeli spying on all the parties in the Iran nuclear talks—Iran itself, the US, Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia—to be a matter of routine. US intelligence services were engaged in their own spying on Israel and intercepted messages among Israeli officials that showed inside knowledge of the talks that went beyond what the US had shared in briefings of the Israeli government.

What fueled the conflict was the Netanyahu government's decision to share secret details of the talks with American congressmen, in an effort to foment political opposition to the impending nuclear deal with Iran. According to the *Journal*:

"The espionage didn't upset the White House as much as Israel's sharing of inside information with US lawmakers and others to drain support from a high-stakes deal intended to limit Iran's nuclear program, current and former officials said."

Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer, a former Republican congressional aide before becoming an Israeli citizen, began briefing both Democratic and Republican congressmen in late January, supplying secret details such as the number of centrifuges that Iran would be permitted to operate, and what types of advanced equipment it could deploy. He allegedly exaggerated the sanctions relief Iran would receive by as much as a factor of ten, the *Journal* report said.

A "senior US official briefed on the matter" told the *Journal*, "It is one thing for the US and Israel to spy on each other. It is another thing for Israel to steal US secrets and play them back to US legislators to undermine US diplomacy."

The report is a demonstration of the mounting tensions between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government in Israel, and of the sharp divisions within the US ruling

elite, in both cases driven by the prospect of a change in US policy towards Iran.

The Obama administration began a secret initiative towards Iran in 2012, with talks held in Oman between State Department officials and senior Iranian officials. The talks intensified after the 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani as president.

Rouhani, a former negotiator in a previous round of arms talks with the imperialist powers, was authorized by Ayatollah Khomeini to seek an agreement that would lift the crushing financial and economic sanctions imposed on Iran. These talks have been extended several times and will resume later this week in Switzerland, with a deadline of March 31 for reaching at least a framework agreement.

Netanyahu's trip to Washington and his March 3 address to a joint session of Congress were an attempt to whip up opposition among both Democrats and Republicans in Congress to a nuclear agreement with Iran. House Speaker John Boehner invited Netanyahu to give the address without notifying the White House, and Obama and other top officials refused to meet with the Israeli leader during his visit.

Israeli officials denounced the *Journal* report but effectively confirmed it. Defense minister Moshe Yaalon declared that the state of Israel did not spy on the United States or its NATO allies, and had not done so since the arrest of Jonathan Pollard, an Israeli spy in the Pentagon, nearly 30 years ago.

However, foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman said the information could be obtained by spying on Iran or other participants in the nuclear talks. "All the information we gathered was from another entity, not the US," he maintained.

The White House made little secret of its hope that Netanyahu would be defeated in the March 17 election, and Obama and other top officials denounced Netanyahu's pre-election statements that he opposed any two-state agreement with the Palestinians, as well as his warning against high turnout among Israeli Arab voters.

In remarks to the liberal Zionist lobby J Street, White House chief of staff Denis McDonough deplored Netanyahu's remarks and said that they could not simply be unsaid, as the Israeli leader attempted to do in the days following his reelection.

Divisions within the US ruling elite over the new Iran policy, which is aimed at reshaping the Middle East and freeing US military forces for operations against Russia, China and other potential antagonists, have reached the point of undermining the constitutional separation of powers between the executive and legislative branch.

In their attempt to derail any treaty with Iran, congressional Republicans have sought to act as a parallel government with their own foreign policy, inviting Netanyahu to address the joint session of Congress, while 47 Republican senators sent an open letter to Ayatollah Khamenei, in an effort to blow up the talks with Obama.

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