

AP'S MATT LEE: US OFFICIALS SAY NETANYAHU TRYING TO DESTROY IRAN NEGOTIATIONS

I haven't chimed in yet on the political drama that has been building around the approaching deadline in the P5+1 negotiations with Iran and the massive breach of protocol by John Boehner in inviting Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress just before the deadline (and just before elections in Israel). More recent rumblings on that front had the US already stating Obama would not meet with Netanyahu, along with suggestions that both John Kerry and Joe Biden are likely to be out of the country when Netanyahu is in Washington. Further, hints were coming out that the US is becoming increasingly irritated with Bibi over his leaking of information that the US has shared on how negotiations with Iran are proceeding.

AP's Matt Lee shed much more light on these issues yesterday. He forced State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki to confirm that the US has now started withholding "classified" parts of the negotiations from Israel. Lee went beyond what he was able to pry out during Psaki's briefing, producing confirmation that the US now feels that Netanyahu is determined to prevent any final deal between the P5+1 and Iran:

The Obama administration said Wednesday it is withholding from Israel some sensitive details of its nuclear negotiations with Iran because it is worried that Israeli government officials have leaked information to try to scuttle the talks – and will continue to do so.

In extraordinary admissions that reflect

increasingly strained ties between the U.S. and Israel, the White House and State Department said they were not sharing everything from the negotiations with the Israelis and complained that Israeli officials had misrepresented what they had been told in the past. Meanwhile, senior U.S. officials privately blamed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself for “changing the dynamic” of previously robust information-sharing by politicizing it.

Working behind the scenes, Lee was able to get unnamed officials to fill in more detail:

But while Earnest and Psaki said the limitations on information sharing were longstanding, U.S. officials more directly involved in the talks said the decision to withhold the most sensitive details of the negotiations dated back only several weeks.

Those officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly, said the administration believes Netanyahu, who is facing a March 17 election at home, has made a political decision to try to destroy the negotiations rather than merely insist on a good deal. This, they said, had led to politically motivated leaks from Israeli officials and made it impossible to continue to share all details of the talks, particularly as Netanyahu has not backed down on his vow to argue against a nuclear deal when he speaks to Congress.

And here’s where it gets really interesting. Pushing on the issue of just what Israel has been leaking, Lee has this:

Neither Earnest nor Psaki would discuss the details of the leaks, but senior

U.S. officials have expressed consternation with reports in the Israeli media as well as by The Associated Press about the number of centrifuges Iran might be able to keep under a potential agreement. Centrifuges are used to enrich uranium and diplomats familiar with the talks have said Iran may be allowed to keep more of them in exchange for other concessions under current proposals that are on the table.

Oh my. There is only one person we could be talking about when it gets to leaks from Israel on anything to do with the Iranian nuclear program. That would be none other than George Jahn, noted transcriber of Israeli leaks since they whole debate began. And just two days ago, Jahn regaled us with a piece titled "Good or bad Iran nuke deal? Israel vs the US administration". And just look what detailed information about centrifuge numbers Jahn managed to obtain:

With only a few weeks left until the March deadline, Iran – which insists it does not want nuclear arms – seems to be ahead in pushing the other side to compromise.

The main dispute is over the size and potency of Iran's uranium enrichment program, which can make both reactor fuel and the fissile core of a weapon. The U.S., along with Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany, came to the table demanding that Tehran dismantle 80 to 90 percent of the nearly 10,000 centrifuges now turning out enriched uranium along with all of the 8,000 or so other machines set up but not working.

But faced with Iranian resistance, diplomats now say the U.S. is prepared to accept 4,500 operating centrifuges – perhaps more – if Tehran agrees to

constraints on their efficiency.

While trying to paint his article as balanced, besides including his information leaked by Israel, Jahn also tips his hand in his choice of “experts”. Two of the three he quotes are seriously lacking in objectivity. Jahn identifies Olli Heinonen only through his previous work at the IAEA but neglects to mention that Heinonen is also a major player in United Against Nuclear Iran, which has become embroiled in its own scandal about leaked information on Iran. Jahn also relies on David Albright, who has turned his Institute for Science and International Security (Hmm, Jahn left “International” out of the name; perhaps to stay away from “ISIS”?) into a pawn in the propaganda battle against Iran.

Albright is staging a “briefing” Monday to put his spin on expected news from IAEA. And of course Jahn is telling us before it has been released that the IAEA report will not be good for Iran.

With Netanyahu, Israel’s government (and its “diplomats”), AP’s Jahn, David Albright and much of Congress all aligned against a deal with Iran, the Obama Administration and the other P5+1 negotiators face a tough road in this final month of negotiations. I hope that sanity and peace somehow prevail, but it is very easy to see multiple paths to failure. Which means war.

Postscript – Let us welcome the new government of Freedonia: Okay, if you’ve made it this far through the post, you deserve a little fun. Matt Lee had a ton of fun with Jen Psaki when he was questioning her about the travel plans for Kerry and Biden. From the transcript:

QUESTION: If the Secretary doesn’t actually take part, is this because of the circumstances surrounding Prime Minister Netanyahu’s visit to the United States, which, of course, have been really overtaken by the fact that he’s

going to address Congress on March 3rd?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we've already been clear that we don't have to plan – we don't have plans, I should say, to have a meeting. I think the more likely reason is that the Secretary is probably going to be out of town, which I don't think surprises any of you, given his overseas travel schedule. We're still working out the next couple of weeks.

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: Wait, the Secretary is probably going to be out of town when?

MS. PSAKI: I'm sure –

QUESTION: For the entire AiPAC conference?

MS. PSAKI: It's only a couple of days, Matt. We have a trip we're working on for early-March, late-February. So –

QUESTION: That's funny, because the Vice President also had some unspecified travel plans that would prevent him from being at Congress to hear the prime minister's speech.

MS. PSAKI: Well, given I think –

QUESTION: Is everyone fleeing –

MS. PSAKI: – we have all spent days if not months on a plane, I don't think it should surprise anyone that the chief diplomat might be overseas.

QUESTION: Well, right, but – yeah. But it just seems to be a little unusual that both the Secretary of State and the Vice President are – have determined right now that they're going to be out of town or out of the country.
(Laughter.)

MS. PSAKI: I wouldn't look at it in those terms. I believe the Vice

President's attending the inauguration for the new Government of Panama, I believe. I can't remember the specifics, but it's a set date. And again, we, as you know, always have a fluid schedule and as we have more information we'll let you know. I expect we'll be certainly represented there.

Lee at first accepts this explanation, but then suddenly remembers something:

QUESTION: I just remember being with the Secretary at the inauguration of the Panamanian prime minister a few months ago.

MS. PSAKI: Perhaps that's not the right information. I'm sure you can check the Vice President's schedule on his website.

And Lee just couldn't resist providing a helpful suggestion:

QUESTION: Might you invent a country that he could go to if there isn't any – (laughter) –

MS. PSAKI: I don't think inaugurations for new leaders are invented, Matt.

Update: Now we have video of this part of the briefing: